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Where No Place is Home:
Understanding Rural Students in Higher Education

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Where No Place is Home:
Understanding Rural Students in Higher Education

by

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Dedication

To my nieces and nephew, Railynn, Baylie Kate, and Ross, as a reminder that I will always fight to make the world a better place for you.

Acknowledgements

The thought of writing these acknowledgements has been overwhelming for a while. Attempting to put the gratitude I feel for everyone who has helped me achieve this dream into words or compile a list of all the people who have supported me on this journey seems incomprehensible. However, it is important to me that I try.

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Where No Place is Home:
Understanding Rural Students in Higher Education

Ashley Nicole Stone, Ph.D.
The University of Texas at Austin, 2017

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Despite students from rural communities coming in second by less than one percentage point in high school graduation rates among the four geographic locales recognized by the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES), their enrollment rates in higher education are the lowest of each category falling just over 12 percentage points behind the next closest locale. Extant literature on rural students reveals both internal and external conflicts that students experience as they choose to pursue higher education and once they matriculate onto their campuses. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand how college students from rural communities negotiate these tensions.

With rural students enrolling in higher education at rates lower than any other locale recognized by the NCES, those students from rural communities who do matriculate risk marginalization both on campus and as they return to their hometown. Drawing upon concepts from Yosso's community cultural wealth model and Anzaldúa's *Borderlands*, I examined how students utilized resources and knowledges from their rural upbringing to navigate the physical, social, and intellectual transitions between their

hometown and new college community. With stakeholders in higher education beginning to look to rural students as an answer to enrollment challenges findings from this study can help inform strategies that colleges and universities use to not only recruit but also retain these students.

Table of Contents

List of Tables

List of Figures

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

"No, no -- now don't tell me. They – they don't understand you at home. They don't appreciate you. You want to see other lands-- big cities -- big mountains – big oceans"
Professor Marvel, The Wizard of Oz

In the 1939 classic, *The Wizard of Oz* (LeRoy), the audience follows Dorothy who seeks to leave behind her rural farm life in Kansas, where she feels misunderstood, in effort to find a place where she might truly fit in. She finds herself transported to a strange new world that is at times uncomfortable, exciting, and scary. Dorothy sets out on an adventure to find the Emerald City meeting new companions along the way. She spends her time searching for the Wizard, for a home. In the end, though she has formed strong relationships with those around her and has found a place that she seems to fit in along the Yellow Brick Road, she still clicks her heels together and claims "there's no place like home," returning her back to the farm in Kansas.

These same tensions between aspirations for what might lay beyond the city limits, and a deep love for the people and places within those limits, exist for young people in rural communities today. Many young adults find themselves seeking not just other lands or big cities, big mountains, and big oceans, but big college campuses. However, in real life these tensions cannot be resolved in two hours of skipping and musical numbers. Still, the idea of Dorothy's longing for something beyond the farm and then longing to return to her home can serve as a powerful metaphor for understanding the push and pull students from rural communities experience as they navigate their physical and social transitions back and forth between their hometown and college campus.

RURAL STUDENTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Despite students from rural communities coming in second by less than one percentage point in high school graduation rates, they come in last when it comes to enrollment rates in higher education, more than 12 percentage points behind the next closest of the four locales identified by the U.S. National Center for Educational Statistics[1] (2014). With such a small portion of rural students pursuing higher education, they have the potential to become marginalized both on the campuses they matriculate to and in the communities they leave behind, making it difficult to feel at home in either space. Current research reveals that students from rural communities experience tensions between their career aspirations and beliefs that their home economy can support those aspirations (Demi, McLaughlin, & Snyder, 2009), as well as tensions resulting from differences in culture between rural communities and college campuses (Dees, 2006). As a result, students must learn to negotiate the internal and external tensions that arise in each space, which can be challenging. Therefore this phenomenological study will seek to better understand how students from rural communities make meaning of these experiences by answering the following research questions:

1. How do undergraduate students from rural communities navigate their transitions into higher education?

[1] The U.S. NCES (2013) currently divides geographic locales into four main categories: city, suburb, town, and rural. Each category is further divided into three subcategories. The categories of city and suburb are divided into the subcategories large, midsize, and small. The categories town and rural are divided into fringe, distant, and remote. In this paper if a category is referenced the coordinating data is inclusive of all three subcategories within that major category.

2. How do undergraduate students from rural communities negotiate tensions they experience within their rural community and within their college campus?

BACKGROUND

Research points to a variety of factors that contribute to rural students not pursuing postsecondary education. The initial source of many of these concerns begins with the strong community ties that exist for most people that live in rural areas (Atkin, 2003). These ties exist not only between the members of the community but also to the culture and physical spaces within the town (Atkin, 2003; Bryan & Simmons, 2009; Hektner, 1995).

While this deep connection to the community may lie at the heart of students' concerns about leaving to pursue a degree, a number of the tensions they experience exist at the intersection of the economy and education. For some students this means not seeing value in education unless it can contribute directly to skills that are useful within the economy of the community (Morris, 2012). For other students the internal conflict arises when they believe it is important to stay in their community, but desire to pursue a career path that they do not believe can be supported within the local economy (Demi, McLaughlin, & Snyder, 201; Morris, 2012). Moreover, for those students who care deeply about the community, understanding how higher education contributes to outmigration and rural brain drain, could increase tensions as these trends often have negative impacts on rural economies which are often already weak (Carr & Kefalas,

2009a; Donehower, Hogg, & Schell, 2011a; Petrin, Schafft, & Meece, 2014; Sherman & Sage, 2011).

With this in mind, to truly understand this phenomenon it is important for scholars to examine the rural communities themselves, in addition to the students coming out of them. A greater understanding of these communities could provide context when researching rural students and may offer vital information about the unique resources these students bring with them to college campuses. Therefore, though this study will focus specifically on students, I will also include literature concerning rural communities themselves to help establish the context from which these students are entering higher education. For the same reason, I will gather demographic data on the participants' communities to offer a greater understanding of the specific context each participant is coming from. This will also help highlight the diversity that exists between rural communities in addition to those characteristics that are common across rural areas allowing for a more robust understanding of the experiences of these students as they move into and through higher education.

Not the Exception, but the Rural

If scholars are to understand the experiences of rural students in higher education, they must first understand the communities from which these students come. It is important that this understanding comes from researching rural communities in their own right, not merely as the opposite of the urban centers in our society. This section outlines the struggles in defining and understanding rural communities and understanding the diversity that exists among them.

Defining rural. The term rural may conjure up similar images in the minds of most people, pictures of bucolic open fields and farmlands, or small mining towns tucked into the mountains. However, the actual definitions of rural can vary (Cromartie & Bucholtz, 2008; Gillon, 2017). In fact, Cromartie and Bucholtz (2008) revealed "[r]esearchers and policymakers share the task of choosing appropriately from among the more than two dozen rural definitions currently used by federal agencies" (p. 29). Concerns about defining what is "rural" are not new. Whitaker (1983) highlights the struggles with conceptualizing rurality in the very first volume of the *Journal of Research in Rural Education*. These definitional discrepancies continued to be highlighted in a report from the Bush School of Government and Public Service at Texas A&M University (2014) that focused on postsecondary enrollment and completion of rural students in Texas. Furthermore, the construction of these definitions can be problematic often focusing only on quantitative measures, rural as space that which is non-urban, or deficit perspectives of rurality (Gillon, 2017).

The United States Census Bureau defines rural areas only in contrast to urban spaces (U.S. Department of Commerce Census Bureau, 2011). This type of urban-centric approach is common among many of the definitions that exist for rural areas (Cromartie & Bucholtz, 2008). Isserman (2005) highlights this issue as he examines the definitions provided by the U.S. Census Bureau and the Office of Management and Budget both of which focus on carefully defining what is urban or metropolitan and use rural to name anything that does not fall within those carefully crafted categories. He explains that rural is "always defined by what it is not – not urban, not metropolitan" (Isserman, 2005,

p. 466). For example, currently the criteria for an urban area includes locations with more than 2,500 people, with a core census tract that has a population density of at least 1,000 people per square mile (ppsm). Adjacent tracts with a population density of at least 500 ppsm may be included in the urban area. All territory that is not considered an urban area is considered to be rural (U.S. Department of Commerce Census Bureau, 2011).

The National Center for Educational Statistics (U.S. NCES, n.d.) uses a slightly different definition, but employs a similar urban-centric approach. The NCES divides geographic locales into cities, suburbs, towns, and rural areas. Cities and suburbs are further divided into subcategories based on their size. Cities are also called principal cities, which are defined as the "primary population and economic center of an MSA" (U.S. NCES, n.d., para. 22), with a metropolitan statistical area (MSA) defined as "one or more contiguous counties that have a core area with a large population nucleus and adjacent communities that are highly integrated by economics or socially) with the core" (para. 23). In Texas, cities such as Tyler and Longview fall on the small end of the spectrum and Houston, San Antonio, and Dallas fall on the large end (U.S. NCES, 2006). Suburbs fall outside of the principle city, but are still located within the urbanized area as defined by the U.S. Census Bureau. These communities would include Round Rock outside of Austin, Katy outside of Houston, or Mesquite outside of Dallas. Towns and rural areas fall outside of these urbanize areas and are subdivided based on their proximity to the nearest urbanized area.

Rural areas are broken into three categories: rural fringe, rural distant, and rural remote. Each category is determined by the location's distance from an urbanized area, a

place with a core population of 50,000 or greater, or an urban cluster, an area with a core population between 2,500 and 50,000 (NCES, n.d.). To provide an example of how this classification system plays out, I will provide some examples of rural classifications as you move eastward away from the city of Dallas. Sunnyvale and Royce City are considered "rural fringe" communities, while Caddo Mills and Commerce are "rural distant". Yantis and Emory are considered "rural remote" within the urban-centric locale coding system.

Furthermore, the NCES also uses the classification of "town" for communities with populations between 2,500 and 50,000. The town classification is also broken into the three categories of fringe, distant, and remote using similar urban-centric metrics. While being contained within an urban cluster, towns are still primarily defined by their proximity to an urban area (NCES, n.d.). If we return to the previous process of looking at communities as you move away from Dallas, Princeton provides one of the best examples of "town fringe," Greenville is a "town distant," and Sulphur Springs is a "town remote."

It could be argued that a "town remote" with a population of 5,000 may have more in common with a locale that is classified as rural, than it does with a "town fringe" that has a population of 40,000. With such a broad range for population for the category of town, the population of the largest communities in the category being 20 times the size of the smallest communities in the category, it should not be surprising that these

communities can look vastly different from one another.[2] For example, my own hometown falls into the same subcategory of "town distant" as Greenville, Texas, which was previously mentioned. My hometown sits at the intersection of two two-lane state highways. The town has a population of 3,124 and the school was recently classified as 3A under the new University Interscholastic League (UIL) classification system in Texas (Social Explorer, 2017; UIL, 2016). In contrast, Interstate 30 runs directly through the town of Greenville, which has a population of 25,892 and a 5A classification (Social Explorer, 2017; UIL, 2016).

Cromartie and Bucholtz (2008) highlight how these types of categories, as well as having multiple definitions that cause the boundaries between what is urban and what is rural to shift back and forth, are problematic for scholars who intend to research these spaces. These changing and conflicting definitions can lead to many people who are actually rural being left out of research on rural spaces, skewing the findings (Isserman, 2005). With this in mind, it is important for scholars to critically consider how they will determine what is to be considered rural within their research. For example, some scholars may choose to include communities identified as "towns" by the NCES in their study of rurality; however, they must be clear about why they have made such choices.

Doreen Massey's (1994) work on place provides additional understanding about why these definitions are problematic. She believes that place should be "constructed not by placing boundaries around it and defining its identity through counter-position to the other which lies beyond, but precisely (in part) through the specificity of the mix of links

[2] See Appendix A for further discussion.

and interconnections to that 'beyond'" (p. 5). This means that it is insufficient to define what should be considered urban and simply claim that anything that does not fit within that definition is rural. Rural areas should be identified by what they are, looking at the common characteristics that they share, and understanding their relationships with other spaces, rather than focusing on what they are not.

Even though the previous definitions offered in this section focus on population density, rural communities are more than statistical calculations and geographic boundaries. Many scholars who research rural communities argue for more complex understandings of these areas (Brown & Swanson, 2003; Cromartie & Bucholtz, 2008; Donehower, Hogg, & Schell, 2011a; Kulcsár & Curtis, 2012). Brown and Swanson (2003) believe that a multidimensional understanding of rurality should include social, economic, and institutional aspects.

For the purpose of this study, rural communities will be defined by using two criteria. First, the student coming from the community must identify their community as rural. Second, the community must fall within the definition of rural or town within the NCES (n.d.) coding system. This allows me to create boundaries for who is most appropriate to participate in the study without defining rural communities solely on population density or from a strictly urban-centric system.

Diversity in rurality. Another obstacle for scholars studying rural communities are commonly held misconceptions about who lives in these communities. The image of rural college students is often that of White students who grew up among expansive fields helping to maintain their family farms. Most people believe that the rural communities of

America, and therefore the students within those communities, share a common European ancestry and are predominately White (Lichter, 2012). While there are many rural students in this category, this image ignores the true diversity of rural students. Indeed, the percentage of White students in public schools is larger in rural areas than any other locale but this is also the case for American Indian and Alaska Native students (U.S. NCES, 2007).

I began this work by conjuring the image of Dorothy from *The Wizard of Oz* (LeRoy, 1939). While this can be an accessible and useful image for engaging readers around the unique concerns of rural students, it can also reinforce the misconceptions that all students from rural communities are White. The world of musical theatre addressed this issue through the creation of *The Wiz*, which translated the 1939 work into a more modern African American culture (*The Wiz* on Broadway, 2016). The book by William F. Brown and early movie adaptation of the musical gave the story "an updated urban sensibility" and moved the main character to Harlem to begin her journey. I can admit that I personally enjoy this musical a great deal; however, it is important to note that continuing to set the opening scenes of the story in a rural community, as in the theatrical version of the musical, does not take away from the authenticity of the translation to African American life.

In *Belonging: A Culture of Place,* bell hooks (2009) tells the story of her own search for a place to belong which has finally led her back to rural Kentucky where she grew up. In her book of poetry about growing up in rural Kentucky, she explains, "since much sociological focus on black experience has centered on urban life – lives created in

cities – little is shared about the agrarian lives of black folk" (hooks, 2012, p. 5). This quotation highlights how experiences of Black people from rural spaces are seldom acknowledged within the broader narrative of Black life. When rural students are assumed to be monolithic White farmers, all "others" are erased from the conversation.

Patricia Hill Collins (2000) mentions "essentially all-Black rural communities" as one of the places where oppositional knowledges can be created and reformed by Black women in the United States (p. 10). Failure to acknowledge the importance of people of color in rural spaces can erase their narratives from the stories of rural communities. Conversely, it also erases the pivotal role that rural communities have played in the histories of people of color.

A close examination of the history of rural Northeast Texas reveals an example of this. In 1960, one of only three predominantly Black counties in the state of Texas was located in rural Northeast Texas (Social Explorer, 2014). In addition, Center Point, a rural community in Northeast Texas, was the site of a boarding school for Black children, the first accredited Black school in the state (Conrad, 2006; Biography of Barbara Conrad, n.d.). When stories such as this are silenced from society's narratives, rich pieces of the history of education, Black communities, and rural communities go missing.

Currently, East Texas continues to have the largest population of rural African American students in the state, at 18% (Texas A&M, 2014). At 68%, it is also the only rural region in Texas where White students comprise the majority. Furthermore, it is important to consider that East Texas is the region with the smallest number of students represented in the 2014 report from The Bush School at Texas A&M.

In South and West Texas the majority of rural students are Latinx[3] at 68% and 50% respectively (Texas A&M, 2014). Since Texas has the largest population of rural students in the country it is important to pay attention to these demographics; however, other states also have increasingly diverse rural communities. The growth of the Latinx population within America is not solely impacting urban cities, but rural communities as well (Lichter, 2012). Latinx populations have increased in many rural areas, as a result of shifts in rural economies including changes in the meat processing industry (Sáenz, 2012). While nationally the Latinx population in rural areas made up 7.5 % of the total rural population in 2010, they "accounted for the majority of the population growth" (Carr, Lichter, & Kefalas, 2012, p. 41). With these statistics in mind, it is crucial that more diverse, and more accurate, representations of rural students are addressed in research literature.

Early scholars in student development theory faced criticisms for putting forth theories that only took into account the experiences of White male students. While these theories were posited as general student development theories, they were not sufficient to speak to the unique experiences of students of color, non-cis-male students, or students who do not identify as heterosexual. Moreover, the theories did not speak to those who sit at the intersections of these identities. Because this study will seek to understand how students in general navigate the internal and external conflicts they experience as they transition physical and socially between their rural community and their college campus,

[3] Because the terms Latino and Latina are gendered, I use Latinx as a gender-neutral alternative, unless speaking about an individual or group that identifies explicitly as Latina or Latino.

being intentional about recruiting participants that are diverse across a number of facets of identity including race, gender, and sexual orientation, as well as coming from a diversity of rural community types, will be integral to creating a foundation for understanding rural students more broadly. As a result, the goal of this specific study will be to focus on experiences of diverse group of rural students as they navigate their transitions between these two worlds, while still highlighting differences that exist between the students. This work helps lay a foundation for further study of rural students in higher education and more thoroughly examine those differences that emerge among unique student populations.

OVERVIEW OF THE METHODS

In this study I used a phenomenological approach to understand the lived experiences of rural students who left their community to pursue a degree at The University of Texas at Austin (UT). A critical paradigm served as the lens through which the entire study was viewed, both in how it was designed and how the data was analyzed. A critical paradigm specifically critiques power structures in society and works to create change that dismantles oppressive structures. This approach served to actively combat the deficit narrative that too often surrounds rural communities and the students that come from them. More specifically, I used a conceptual framework that combined concepts from Gloria Anzaldúa's (1987) *Borderlands* and Tara Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth model to guide the study.

Anzaldúa's (1987) work provides an example of powerful women coping with diverse worlds grating up against one another, much like the rural community and college

campus can scrape against each other for rural students. Her concept of the new consciousness of *la mestiza* provided and example of how students can engage with old and new ideologies, embrace ambiguity and ambivalence, and emerge with a new and more complex understanding of the world. Yosso's (2005) model highlights a variety of forms of capital that communities of color leverage when negotiating higher education. This model speaks to the wealth that students possess within themselves, rather than focusing on potential deficits. This study investigated how these forms of capital were also relevant for students coming from rural communities and how these resources helped them to move toward the new consciousness that Anzaldúa speaks of.

For this study I used a combination of criterion and maximum variation sampling in an effort to create boundaries for what constitutes a rural community while also representing the diversity within these spaces. Sampling participants in this way allowed me to look for themes that are essential to the rurality of students across other diverse identities that they possess. This process was facilitated through the first round of data collection, which consisted of an online survey that collected demographic data from potential participants about themselves and their communities.

I collected multiple forms of data in order to create a more trustworthy study. In addition to the initial online survey, I also completed two rounds of in-depth semi-structured interviews with each participant. These interviews followed a format for phenomenological interviewing modified from Seidman (2013). The first interview focused on the student's life history and the second focused on the experience of moving between the college campus and rural community and encourage the student to reflect on

and make meaning of their experiences. Each student also kept a journal throughout the process to help track of their thoughts as they reflected on their experiences both with the phenomenon itself and the experience of participating in the study.

Data was collected and analyzed simultaneously to further increase the trustworthiness of the study and allow for an iterative process that strengthened both the methods and the results. The data was analyzed using both etic and emic coding processes, with etic codes coming from the conceptual framework. Emic codes helped fill in gaps that exist in the conceptual framework and highlight potential alternate theories about how rural students negotiate the tensions that arise between their rural communities and college campuses that were not considered through conceptual framework. After these processes were completed, axial coding was used to determine if relationships existed between the codes.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge the scope and limitations of this study. The research was conducted in Texas, which has the largest population of rural students coming out of the K-12 educational pipeline and taps into the increasing diversity of rural populations nationwide. In addition, studying rural students in Texas offered a new perspective on the population by breaking away from the bulk of research, which focuses on rural communities and students from the Appalachian region. While this made Texas an ideal location for the study, it also limited the findings since rural communities exist across the country and globe and each region will shape students in unique ways.

Furthermore, this study looked specifically at students who left their rural community to pursue higher education at UT, a large flagship university in an urban area.

A variety of opportunities to pursue higher education are available to students in rural communities that are not reflected in this particular scenario. Students may remain in their community and commute to a campus, if one is accessible, or pursue higher education online. These students may also choose to begin their education at a two-year institution or an institution in a rural community. There are also a wide variety of institutions that can be found in urban areas, which are not large research-intensive universities, such as small liberal arts colleges or regional universities. UT is also a predominantly White institution and there are a wide variety of minority-serving institutions that students could choose to attend. Understanding how the increasing diversity of the landscape of higher education impacts the ways that rural students engage with it, is a valuable pursuit; however, fell outside the scope of this study.

UNDERSTANDING KEY TERMS

While I previously laid out the difficulty of defining what it means to be rural and how it was defined within this study, there are additional terms that must be further examined to better understand this work. The first research question that drove this study sought to understand the experience of students' *transitioning* between their rural community and college campus. It is important to remember that the students were not simply moving into a new geographic location but also into a new cultural and ideological space. Therefore the students' transitions included their physical movement back and forth between the rural and college communities, as well as the social and ideological changes students made as they navigated those physical, cultural, and

intellectual spaces. As a result, the interview protocols addressed the transitions students experienced in each of these areas.

The second research question that the study explored focused on the *tensions* that these transitions caused for rural students. These tensions were ultimately both internal and external conflicts experienced by the students. This relates to Levy-Warren's (1988) discussion of the internal and external separation experienced during cultural relocation. The internal separation relates to the identity formation and the "development of mental representations of self and object" (p. 302), and the external separation, which refers to the geographic move and loss of people and things. Within the context of this study the internal tension experienced by students arose as they made choices about how to engage with their rural community after leaving and the implications those choices had on their relationship to the community. The external tensions being examined were the challenges and conflicts that participants experience in their college relationships that stem from their rural background, as well as those that arose in their relationships with people who remained in their rural community as a result of their time away at college.

An additional term that was not directly used within the research questions, but was important in the context of the study, was *values*. Values were important as I examined the ideologies of students and was defined as the beliefs that students held which informed their decisions and behaviors. Having a deeper understanding of how this concept was utilized within the context of this study should offer a more precise understanding of what the research sought to accomplish and how to contextualize the findings that emerged.

ORGANIZATION OF THE STUDY

In this first chapter, I have sought to give a brief introduction to rural students and the communities they come from, as well as highlight some of the misconceptions that exist concerning these students and the unique challenges that come with pursuing research that centers their narratives and experiences. I have also given a brief overview of how I examined the lived experiences of these students and their attempts to make meaning of those experiences. In chapter two I will dive more deeply into the extant literature on both rural communities and rural students to lay the foundation that this study was built upon. I will look at where and how research concerning rural students has been completed in the past and what gaps still exist within the literature. Finally, in the third chapter provide a more thorough explanation of the methods that were used to address the central questions of this study. I will explain why phenomenology was a particularly appropriate approach to this research and how this methodology guided the design of the study. In addition, I explain how the choices I made concerning the study created consistency across the process and increased the trustworthiness of the findings. In chapter four I offer a look into the students who participated in the study through both aggregate data about the group as a whole and their participants and then through individual vignettes for each student. I then highlight the findings that emerged through analysis of the data that I collected in chapter five. Finally in chapter six I discuss the connection between the findings and extant literature, offer a slightly altered version of the conceptual framework based on the findings, and then discuss the implications for future research, practice, and policy that can be derived from this study.

SIGNIFICANCE

As I conclude this first chapter, it is important to address why this type of work should be pursued. Many studies on rural communities and education reveal factors that contribute to educational aspirations of rural students or provide explanations about why students choose not to pursue higher education. This literature reveals the unique tensions that students from rural communities experience; however, a gap exists in research on how students negotiate these tensions once they have matriculated into higher education or how they negotiate their relationships between their hometown and new college community. Pursuing research to understand how students from rural communities navigate their transitions into higher education and manage relationships with their new college community and their home community can play an important role in their retention.

While rural student enrollments in postsecondary education continue to lag behind their urban and suburban counterparts, their numbers are increasing. This is a particularly important trend for Texas, which has the largest population of rural students in the country. Ten percent of Texas' K-12 population comes from rural communities, making these crucial areas for the state to invest in to help "close the gap" (Texas A&M, 2014).

Furthermore, early in March of 2016, the Tennessee State Senate Education Committee voted to devote $8 million to the University of Tennessee's agricultural extension service and rural outreach programs (Locker, 2016), showing yet another state reaching out to rural students as a way to boost enrollments. While it is exciting to see

this type of investment in rural students, the committee decided that all $8 million would come from the University of Tennessee Office for Diversity and Inclusion, stripping it of all but its federal funding.

While such a bill could serve to pit rural communities and communities of color against one another, it is important to understand that these categories are not mutually exclusive and it is problematic to believe that they are. This is why a disruption of the myth that students from rural communities are racially monolithic and creating an understanding of how students may experience marginalization based on their rurality are crucial as universities seek to recruit these young people to their institutions. As Tennessee begins new outreach efforts to rural communities, particularly as they reach out to those communities in Eastern Tennessee that are predominantly Black (Social Explorer, 2014), the Office of Diversity and Inclusion could become a salient part of the retention of these new students. By the end of the month, the controversial bill had been withdrawn (Diverse Staff, 2016). In his "State of UT" speech, Dr. Joe DiPietro, president of the University of Tennessee-Knoxville, highlighted that the institution's commitment to diversity stretches beyond race and ethnicity and included geography among his list of other aspects the university is committed to.

Then in November, barely 48 hours after the 2016 presidential election was decided, I was at the annual meeting of the Association for the Study of Higher Education (ASHE) and surrounded by other higher education scholars newly invested in understanding rural communities. As the country was reminded that the rural population in America was a powerful force capable of swaying a national election, a renewed

conversation about rural spaces emerged. This new interest spread beyond the conference as national papers began to analyze the election returns and the political climate of these areas and opinion editorials emerged to try to explain these forgotten communities across the country (e.g. Badger, 2016; Jaffe, 2016; Leonard, 2017).

Kai Schafft, director of the Center on Rural Education acknowledged this increased attention in January (Pappano, 2017). While it has been heartening to hear a population I care deeply about suddenly be given center stage, I also become anxious as I hear colleagues use language that continues to frame rural communities using a deficit perspective or focus solely on predominantly White working-class communities. Though the latter made sense in the wake of the 2016 election, since many of the counties that swung the election to a Republican victory were predominantly White and working class, as attention turns to rural communities and people seek to better understand them, it is vital that rural scholars continue to fight against simplistic and deficit narratives concerning this population (Stone, 2017). News stories and conversations such as these lead me to believe not only that there is a great need for research concerning rural students but also that the need is urgent.

In both *The Wizard of Oz* (LeRoy, 1939) and *The Wiz* (*The Wiz* on Broadway, 2016) Dorothy is in search of a place where she belongs, a place to feel at home. I am not so naïve to believe that any university will be able to make all of its students feel at home, but I do believe that it is something each university should strive for. For college campuses this means going beyond simply being hospitable, which may help students

feel welcome on campus, but still always a guest, and attempting to help students find a true place that they belong on the campus.

With the number of rural students matriculating to colleges and universities increasing, administrators should seek to understand more about the unique resources and needs of these students. By pursing higher education, rural students contend with becoming marginalized both within their new campus and their home community. In addition to negotiating their roles within each community they are also likely to face conflict between the conservative values of their hometown and the liberalizing effects of college attendance (Atkin, 2003; Dees, 2006; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). These experiences can cause students to feel that they are separating from their rural community not only physically but also socially and culturally as well. Understanding these issues can help administrators in higher education create support systems that ease these tensions in ways that are beneficial for colleges and universities, rural communities, and most importantly the students themselves. By leveraging various forms of capital and learning to straddle multiple cultures, rural students can go beyond simply enrolling in higher education and make both their rural communities and their college campuses at least begin to feel like home.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

In this chapter I will review extant research literature on rural communities and the students within them. While there are rural communities across the United States, at times I focus on Texas, which has the largest population of rural students enrolled in K-12 education and therefore the largest opportunity for rural students to be recruited into higher education (Texas A&M, 2014). I also explore why it is important to understand rural students' obstacles to entering higher education and their potentially unique needs upon matriculation. Finally, I explain why a critical paradigm is an appropriate lens for approaching research that centers rural students and more specifically how Tara Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth model and concepts from Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands* can work together to create a conceptual framework that is useful for examining the experiences of rural students in higher education.

RURAL COMMUNITIES

Rural communities have too often been neglected in the research literature, particularly scholarship concerning education. As society has become more urban-centric, attention to the unique spaces of rural communities has faded. As rural communities shift from focus the pictures of them become distorted. In order to conduct meaningful research concerning rural students in higher education, scholars must also make an authentic attempt to understand the communities they come from.

Economics and Education

Rurality is based on a small scale that can include the economic base for the community, which is typically narrowly focused and land-based, centering on resources such as timber or minerals in addition to the agricultural cultivation of the land itself (Atkin, 2003; Donehower et al., 2011a; Howley & Howley, 2010). In these spaces, education is often only viewed as valuable if it contributes directly to skills that are useful in the community's economy (Atkin, 2000, 2003; Hektner, 1995; Morris, 2012). This is particularly true for young men who are more likely to believe their best occupational opportunities lie within the community, where manual labor is often valued over academic pursuits (Brown, Copeland, Costello, Erkanli, & Worthman, 2009; Morris, 2012). With this in mind, it is not surprising that in rural communities many young people value what they consider to be training that affords them the skills valuable in the community's economy, over more formal education (Atkin, 2000, 2003; Morris, 2012).

A study by Brown and colleagues (2009) of rural counties in North Carolina showed that this assumption was particularly strong in males who may have been more likely to view local occupational opportunities that did not require a college degree as appealing. Therefore, these young men were less likely to leave the community in an effort to pursue higher education. A similar pattern emerged in Morris' (2012) ethnographic work, where young men valued courses such as auto mechanics, which allowed them to work with their hands and gain skills that could be valuable in contributing to their economic future within the community.

Carr and Kefalas (2009a) classified these types of students as "stayers." These young people often make the transition into adulthood quickly, entering the workforce in construction or factory work. This can provide enough money to establish a home and support family with a low cost of living in the community; however, "these jobs are particularly prone to stagnating wages, disappearing benefits, and downsizing" (Carr & Kefalas, 2009a, pp. 20-21). These findings may contextualize the NCES statistics, which show that rural students have historically enrolled in postsecondary education at lower rates than their urban and suburban peers (NCES, 2014).

Rural Brain Drain

Another contribution to these numbers may be the skepticism about higher education due to its role in the outward migration of young people from rural communities, which also has an impact on the local economy (Atkin, 2003; Donehower et al., 2011a; Wright, 2012). Rural brain drain speaks to the outmigration of high achieving young people from rural communities (Petrin, Schafft, & Meece, 2014). Petrin and colleagues (2014) found a strong ambivalence in rural communities concerning outmigration. Educators and community members aspire for young people to have as many opportunities for the future as possible, but recognize that many of these opportunities lie outside of the community, particularly if the community is struggling economically.

This trend is especially prevalent among young women in rural communities. In contrast to his findings about young men in rural communities, Morris (2012) found that young rural women did not perceive as many employment opportunities in their

community. Therefore, these women often believed that higher education was the key to an economically stable future. They placed a high value on education because they saw it as their "way out."

The implications of rural brain drain are that schools and teachers invest more heavily in those students most likely to succeed in post-secondary education; however, those are also the students that are most likely to leave the community (Carr & Kefalas, 2009a; Petrin et al., 2014; Sherman & Sage, 2011). In fact Howley and Howley (2010) claim, "[s]chools facilitate out-migration, in part, by shaping identities that willingly embrace departure" (p.46). Chenoweth and Galliher (2004) explain that

> [it] may be that some students are 'groomed' for college from the earliest years, by school personnel and others. Early academic achievements facilitate both objective (e.g., GPA) and subjective (e.g., perceiving oneself as intelligent) measures of success, which in turn garners attention from adults and opens doors for future academic possibilities. (p.10)

Carr and Kefalas (2009a) refer to these students as "achievers." These students often felt the community had high expectations for their future and a great deal of support to pursue that future. Hlinka, Mobelini, and Giltner (2015) also highlight the "push" of encouragement that students from rural communities reported experiencing as they pursued their degree; however, Bryan and Simmons (2009) found that, despite this support, these students can also feel a sense of pressure to be successful that can become overwhelming.

Farmer and colleagues (2006) completed a study, which examined conceptions that adults within a rural community had of successful early adult outcomes for African American high school students in a rural community. Their findings revealed two main

themes for successful outcomes with the first involving leaving the community to pursue higher education and a career and then reconnecting to the community. The second successful outcome being those who establish themselves within the community and are able to find jobs that allow them to support themselves and their families. The themes for successful outcomes emphasized the importance of supporting the needs of both the individual's family and community. Though participants were aware of challenges to this:

> …they also acknowledged significant limits in the resources and opportunities in the community, and they indicated that it was not realistic to expect many youth to stay in their hometowns or to return immediately following the completion of their postsecondary education. (Farmer et al., 2006, p.9)

These results echoed findings from a quantitative study conducted by Ley, Nelson, and Beltyukova (1996), completed a decade prior, which looked at the congruence of aspirations of rural youth and expectations by their parents and school staff members. This study spanned 21 high schools across 21 different states and Ley and colleagues found students who were certain about wanting to pursue a postsecondary degree were supported by teachers and family members; however, they were still concerned about academic and financial limitations as well as a lack of economic opportunities within the community to allow them to return.

This is how the hollowing out of the middle occurs within rural communities. It is "the loss that results every time a college-educated twenty-something on the verge of becoming a worker, taxpayer, homeowner, or parent leaves" (Carr & Kefalas, 2009b, p. 1). This hollowing can create an amplifying loop since those communities that are

already struggling economically are the most likely to have young people seeking economic opportunities outside of the community, putting further strain on the community's economy.

Strong Community Ties

A strong sense of community is also common among rural areas. This creates a strong bond between each member of the community. Therefore, since the pursuit of higher education can be viewed as contributing to individual aspirations and outmigration from these communities, students may fear that enrolling in college will strain, or even sever, those ties (Atkin, 2003, 2000; Donehower et al., 2011a).

Members of rural communities often feel closely tied to both the geographic space and individual members of the community (Atkin, 2003; Bryan & Simmons, 2009; Hektner, 1995; Wright, 2012). These strong bonds could be another significant factor in students' choices to not attend college and have the potential to influence students in at least two ways. First, as mentioned previously, students may be concerned about how outmigration related to higher education is impacting the economy of their community. Second, students may not only be committed to the economic benefits they personally receive from immediately entering the community's workforce but also feel a sense of responsibility to stay at home, continue and/or increase their contributions to their family, and remain engaged citizens of the community (Carr & Kefalas, 2009a). These bonds can make it difficult for the student to depart the community, even for only a few years to complete a college degree.

Understanding how these factors play into the low rates of enrollment in higher education for students from rural communities can serve as a launching point for the creation of new and innovative initiatives concerning the recruitment of these students into higher education and opportunities to reinvigorate the economies of rural areas. A report from the Bush School at Texas A&M University (2014) posits that rural students are a prime population from which institutions of higher education could recruit in their efforts to close the gap in higher education enrollment and attainment in Texas. Knowing why students are not leaving these rural areas can help colleges and universities create more effective recruitment strategies. Furthermore, this knowledge could contribute to more sustainable rural communities by creating an understanding of how the different forms of capital that students gain through higher education can be utilized to strengthen their home economies. One study that broached this topic was conducted by Wright (2012) who, in her study of community college students in Harlan County, Kentucky, focused in on participants who were specifically interested in how their postsecondary degrees could be used to directly impact their hometown in positive ways. Work such as this highlights how these efforts can be mutually beneficial for the rural communities, institutions of higher education, and most importantly the students themselves.

RURAL STUDENTS

While it is important to understand the communities from which students depart, it is also important to understand the students themselves. Though little research examines rural students in higher education, literature on K-12 students in rural communities and the educational aspirations of rural students does exist. This section

highlights recent data on students from rural communities and then investigates research on how the rural context influences the experiences of these students. Finally, I review some of the literature that examines the experiences of rural students in higher education.

Recent Data on Rural Students

High school graduation rates for communities classified as rural by the NCES come in second only to those from suburban locales and only by less than one percentage point (NCES, 2013). In fact, each of the three subcategories for rural communities boasts a high school graduation rate between 80.2% and 80.9%. Despite these high completion rates for secondary education, higher education enrollment for students from these communities lags significantly behind those from other locales (NCES, 2014). While the gap begins to close for those ages 25-29, those from rural communities continue to enroll in undergraduate, graduate, and professional programs at lower rates than any other locale. Pierson and Hanson (2015) found that in Oregon not only did rural students enroll in higher education at lower rates than their non-rural counterparts but also persisted at lower rates across all institutional types and all levels of high school achievement.

Nationally, women attend college at a higher rate than men and this trend remains true for each separate locale. However, this discrepancy is even starker in those from rural communities (NCES, 2014). In 2014, 35.1% of women ages 18-24 from rural communities were enrolled in postsecondary education. Only 24% of men in the same age group from rural communities were enrolled in a postsecondary program of any kind. This creates a difference of 11.1 percentage points, while the female-male discrepancies found in other locales range between 6.1 and 8.3 percentage points. Once again, this data

is further explained through the findings of Morris (2012) that revealed women are more likely to perceive higher education as a necessary means to financial stability. Furthermore, Hektner (1995) found that those young males who want to pursue higher education, but are conflicted about leaving the community, are significantly more likely than their female counterparts to intend to delay their entrance into higher education by at least a year.

As previously mentioned, the classification of "town" as defined by the NCES is a broad category and may contain communities with rural characteristics. This may explain why the standard error for the NCES (2014) data for towns is greater than all other locales.[4] Therefore, the fact the percentages for the enrollment of 18-24 year olds from locales designated as towns are much more closely aligned to those of their city and suburban counterparts than rural locales, may not present the most accurate picture. Moreover, while these descriptive statistics from towns closely align with city and suburban locales, they do lag behind in every area and these gaps increase when looking at males ages 25-29. Additional quantitative analysis could reveal if these differences are statistically significant. Furthermore, disaggregating data collected from locales that have been designated as towns may reveal a clearer picture of why the standard errors found in the town statistics are so disparate and be useful in creating new locale definitions that more accurately represent each community.

[4] The data referenced here can be found in Table 1.1.

	Ages 18–24		Ages 25–29	
	Enrolled in any program		Enrolled in any program	
Locale and sex	Percent	Standard error	Percent	Standard error
Total enrolled	42.3	(0.10)	16.0	(0.08)
City	47.5	(0.19)	18.0	(0.11)
Suburban	42.5	(0.17)	16.7	(0.16)
Town	41.3	(0.33)	12.9	(0.28)
Rural	29.6	(0.19)	10.7	(0.17)
Total male	38.2	(0.12)	14.4	(0.12)
City	43.8	(0.24)	16.8	(0.16)
Suburban	38.6	(0.23)	15.0	(0.23)
Town	37.2	(0.41)	10.4	(0.33)
Rural	24.7	(0.29)	8.3	(0.21)
Total female	46.7	(0.15)	17.8	(0.10)
City	51.2	(0.24)	19.2	(0.17)
Suburban	46.6	(0.22)	18.3	(0.22)
Town	45.6	(0.45)	15.6	(0.43)
Rural	35.3	(0.25)	13.3	(0.27)

Table 1.1: Percentage of Persons Ages 18-29 Enrolled in Colleges or Universities

Note: This table has been modified from the NCES (2013b) Rural Education Table B.3.b.-1 and only reflects the "Enrolled in any program" category for each age group. The complete table can be retrieved from http://nces.ed.gov/surveys/ruraled/tables/b.3.b.-1.asp.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Commerce, Census Bureau, American Community Survey (ACS), 2013, previously unpublished data.

Conflicting Values

Rural students who do attend postsecondary education often talk about a constant feeling of being pulled back to their home communities (Bryan & Simmons, 2009; Dees, 2006). This is likely an extension of the conflict students feel even as early as the

seventh and eighth grade between their desire to remain within their community, their educational and career goals, and the fear their community will not be able to sustain those goals (Bryan & Simmons, 2009; Demi, McLaughlin, and Snyder, 2009; Hektner, 1995). For these students, moving away to attend college can strain the strong ties they have to their rural community and the people within it.

Means, Clayton, Conzelmann, Baynes and Umbach (2016) found the same concerns to be true for the rural African American high school students who participated in their study. Their students expressed that the push of encouragement that they felt from their families was counteracted by the pull of family responsibilities. Furthermore, in their study of community college students from rural communities, Hlinka, Mobelini, and Giltner (2015) found that these tensions continued once students matriculated into college. As previously mentioned, this pull might also come from a feeling of guilt for increasing the issue of outmigration from the community and not directly contributing back to its economy.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, the transitions students experience are not only geographic but also social and ideological. As a result, the separation that students experience can encompass each of these areas. Schultz (2004) found that the change in scope of physical space, moving from a small community to a large town and campus, produced anxiety for many of his participants; however, the students also found coping with the cultural changes to be "a very difficult and emotionally charged process" (p.49).

Dees (2006) examined rural students who were enrolled in higher education while still living in their home community, and yet these students still felt a tension between the

culture of the university and their hometown. Theobald (2011) reminds us of the following:

> Identity formation, for instance, is directly related to place and, related to this, cultural norms are determined in part by conditions that exist in particular places. But neither norms for behavior nor an individual's identity are exclusively determined by conditions in a place. Both are portable, meaning that norms and identity conceptions can be brought to new places, in the process creating a clash of cultures and a long list of potentially problematic social, economic, environmental, and political fissures. (p. 242)

For those rural students who enter higher education, this tension can stem from a difference in values espoused by the rural community versus those espoused by the university.

Rural communities are often characterized by conservative and traditional values (Atkin, 2003; Dees, 2006), and colleges and universities are often associated with having a liberalizing impact on students' values (Dees, 2006; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). This is the tension that students in Dees (2006) study experienced, one that made some students feel a sense of isolation from their home culture even when they still lived within the community. Thus, students may feel conflicted about leaving the geographic location of the rural community as well as the potential social or cultural separation experienced in adjusting to higher education.

Conflicting Aspirations

Despite the continued lag in matriculation to higher education from rural students, some progress has been made. Legutko (2008) replicated a study from 1995 again in 2005 examining the educational aspirations of students in rural Pennsylvania. He found a statistically significant increase, 11%, in those students who intended to enroll in higher

education. If this trend holds true across the country, college administrators may find it advantageous to recruit rural students and begin to turn those increased aspirations into increased enrollments on their campuses.

These shifting aspirations could be the result of threats to the rural economies, which at one time kept students tied to their home communities. Outmigration, along with continued attempts to exploit the resources of these communities, and corporate agribusiness challenging the local family farms, all threaten these rural economies (Donehower et al., 2011a). Howley and Howley (2010) found that this is felt particularly strong in what they refer to as resource-extraction communities, where economies are based on the extraction of the natural resources of the community whether that is coal mining or the logging of timber. Agrarian communities are seen as more durable and the schooling is more likely to espouse values of "frugality, stewardship, and enjoyment of work, and because it helps to sustain a vision of the common good locally lived" (p.47). As previously mentioned, this can lead to more students seeking careers outside of their home community.

In 2016, Means and colleagues found that rural African American students had concerns about the limited career opportunities available in their community. Demi, McLaughlin, and Snyder (2009) found that how rural students perceived their communities' viability, or ability to support their future career plans, was related to their future residential aspirations. Once again, Carr and Kefalas (2009) found that many of the economic opportunities that entice students right out of high school in rural communities often offer stagnant wages, disappearing benefits, and at risk for

downsizing. These findings may explain why so many rural students are concerned about the ability of their rural community to provide a financially stable future, particularly in a field they find satisfying.

For students who reported low community viability, over 70% reported wanting to live somewhere other than their rural home by the time they were 30 (Demi et al., 2009). Only 40.1% of students who viewed their community as highly viable wanted to live somewhere other than their community in the future. Those students who believed their community could support their career aspirations made up the largest percentage (43.6%) of those who hoped to still be living in their rural community at age 30.

These findings echo the work of Hektner (1995) and Howley, Harmon, and Leopold, (1996) who compared rural, urban, and suburban students. Hektner (1995) looked at rural students in the Midwest and found that though a majority of students in each area felt that it was important to continue to live close to their home, only rural students felt that they would eventually need to move away. These students felt a conflict between wanting to pursue higher education and wanting to remain close to their community. Howley and colleagues (1996) studied rural and non-rural students in West Virginia and found that the pull of modern dispositions and the push of dissatisfaction with their current community is stronger for rural students than no-rural students, making "holding on to home… difficult work for rural people" (p.158). These scholars emphasized how this contributes to the outmigration experienced by rural communities.

It is important to remember that these studies are looking at the aspirations of students rather than their attainment. Byun, Meece, Irvin, and Hutchins (2012) conducted

studies on large quantitative data sets concerning what factors influence the educational aspirations of rural students, but warned that it is important that scholars begin to study actual educational attainment as well. Hlinka and colleagues (2015) completed their research on students attending community college. All of their participants described the desire to get a good job as an important factor in their pursuit of a degree. In addition, the students echoed findings from other studies feeling conflicted about whether to stay within the community or leave. Once again, students voiced their strong connection to the people and physical space of their community as reasons for wanting to remain in it; however, they also feared that the community would not be able to support their career aspirations.

Wright (2012) also looked at community college students who articulated their concerns about the lack of jobs available to them in their county but also had a strong determination from a few of the students to remain and use their degree to help transform the community. The greater amount of conflict students experience connected to their educational, career, and residential aspirations may also create a greater discrepancy between rural students' educational aspirations and their actual attainment than their urban or suburban counterparts experience.

Demi and colleagues (2009) also found that educational and residential aspirations were related. Of those students who wanted to attend a four-year institution, approximately two-thirds wanted to live somewhere other than their home town by age 30, while only half of those who intended to complete a high school diploma or less intended to stay in the rural community. Similarly, Bryan and Simmons (2009) found

that only three of their ten participants intended to return to their community immediately after graduation. While many of those students who left the community felt a pressure to return upon completion of their degree, students believed that jobs in the medical field were the only "professional" positions available to them in their home community. All three students intending to return immediately were entering medical professions. Once again, finding ways that rural students who enter higher education might be able to utilize their degrees to pursue satisfying careers back in their hometowns, might ease some of the tensions while also uncovering new opportunities to reinvigorate rural economies. Searching for such strategies could create a new amplifying loop, which works to increase rural student enrollment in higher education and boost the economic opportunities within the community.

A Persistent Gap

Scholars across disciplines should continue to acknowledge these trends and understand that the implications of increased participation in higher education will not only impact the campuses that rural students arrive on but also the communities that they are leaving. In addition, this influx of new students to higher education provides an exciting new area for educational researchers to pursue. With this shift in demographics, institutions of higher education should consider the unique resources that students from rural communities bring into higher education, as well as the potentially unique needs of these students and how to support them and ensure their success throughout their college experience.

Research concerning rural communities and the students within them reveals specific tensions that these students manage even before they enter higher education. The literature shows that this internal conflict concerning higher education begins as early as junior high when students begin to consider what they will want to do in the future. It also reveals that these tensions continue for students as they progress through their college or university experience. While work has been done to highlight the internal and external conflicts that students experience prior to and during their journey through higher education, few have sought to understand how students manage those tensions. Dees (2006) served as an example of this by seeking to understand how students coped with the unique cultural conflicts that they experienced between their college classroom and the community they continued to live within using a specifically psychological theoretical approach. However, additional research in this area is still necessary.

This study will seek to continue to fill the remaining void by exploring how rural students negotiate tensions beyond those that are primarily cultural and utilizing theories that are not strictly psychological. My hope is that findings from this study will help educators in the rural K-12 pipeline better prepare students for higher education and for faculty members and administrators in higher education to support rural students as they pursue a degree and at least begin to find a sense of home both on campus and in their rural community. Understanding the strategies that rural students employ to address the internal and external conflicts that they face as a result of their rurality and higher education scrape against one another focused in on participants focused in on participants can help student affairs professionals, college administrators, and faculty members better

understand how to meet the needs of these students. Furthermore, it can help family members, educators, and other rural community members better understand how to support the students from rural communities who enter higher education in ways that encourage their persistence without creating overwhelming pressures that may produce additional barriers to rural student success.

PARADIGM AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

In Texas, stakeholders in higher education, such as college administrators and policy makers, are beginning to recognize the potential for rural communities to serve as an opportunity for colleges and universities to increase enrollment and beginning to focus outreach and research efforts on supporting these students (Greater Texas Foundation, 2015; Locker, 2016; Pappano, 2017; Texas A&M, 2014). Developing a richer understanding of the unique assets and needs of rural students can play a vital role in ensuring that once recruited, they thrive at these institutions and persist to graduation. With scant research examining the experiences of students from rural communities that have enrolled in higher education, it may be helpful for scholars to examine theoretical frameworks that have been created and used with other populations to guide research on rural students.

I believe that it is important to study students from rural communities and their experiences in a way that examines the unique resources that they bring into higher education. In this section, I show why a critical paradigm is an appropriate way to approach work with rural students generally, by looking at the role of place, specifically rural space, in Collins' (2000) matrix of domination. I will further explain how the

community cultural wealth model (Yosso, 2005) and certain concepts from *Borderlands* (Anzaldúa, 1987) work together to create a coherent new conceptual framework for researching the specific way that rural students may negotiate the internal and external conflicts they experience as they progress through higher education. While both of these works are developed from a critical race epistemology, I make the case for why it is appropriate to utilize them in new ways for the purpose of understanding and addressing the needs of rural students. However, it is important to be clear that I am not equating race with rurality, but seeking an epistemological approach and conceptual framework complex enough to account for the diversity that exists among rural students.

Critical Paradigm

Theobald (2011) discusses how once active voices of rural communities have quieted since the time of the Great Depression, as a result of marginalization. While these voices may be difficult to hear over the noise of urban domination, rural voices still exist, and work must be done to amplify them once again. After growing up in a rural community, and then attending college, I am particularly passionate about giving voice to students who enter higher education from rural spaces. A critical paradigm is used to interrogate power and social systems. This epistemological approach also focuses on ways to create social change on behalf of those who have been oppressed by those social systems (Hays & Singh, 2012). As a result, I believe that a critical paradigm is the best approach to exploring the narratives of rural students.

Matrix of domination. Patricia Hill Collins (2000) utilizes the concept of the matrix of domination in her intersectional epistemology of Black feminist thought.

Crenshaw (1991) discusses these same issues in her work on intersections of oppressed identities such as race and sexuality or gender and immigration status. From her standpoint as a legal scholar she explains that while racism and sexism often intersect in the lives of women of color, the practices of feminism and antiracism seldom work together to address the issues that lie at the intersection of those facets of identity. Collins (2000) draws upon intersectionality but differentiates the matrix of domination in the following way: "… the matrix of domination refers to how these intersecting oppressions are actually organized. Regardless of the particular intersection involved, structural, disciplinary, hegemonic and interpersonal domains of power reappear across quite different forms of oppression" (p. 18). Scheurich and Young (1997) highlight these systems by examining how racism is imbedded in each level of society from the individual to civilization and how each level creates racist epistemologies, or ways of approaching research. As a result of these intertwined macro- and microstructures of power and oppression that people exist within, individuals may gain privilege from some parts of the matrix, but be penalized by other parts.

With this in mind, different tools, or epistemological approaches, may be necessary to dismantle the various types of oppression that different groups experience as a result of their specific position in the matrix. In my analyses, place is both the physical and social space in which the matrix of domination operates and a part of the matrix itself. Understanding how a rural identity might serve as source of oppression for a student, and the role of geography in the organization of intersecting oppressions, can expand old epistemologies and generate new ones that speak to the privilege and

oppression associated with place.

Massey (1994) argues that space is both a physical and temporal concept that is based on social relations. She defines place as being identified by its interactions with what is beyond the place itself. Gieryn (2000) claims that,

> [t]he making of places – identifying, designating, designing, building, using interpreting remembering – has been examined in three sociological literatures, only sometimes brought together: upstream forces that drive the creation of place with power and wealth; professional practices of place-experts; perceptions and attributions by ordinary people who experience place (and act on those understandings). (p. 468)

In addition, Gieryn (2000) draws the conclusion that place matters for almost anything sociological, "politics and identity, history and futures, inequality and community" (p. 482). These conceptions of space and place help in understanding how power may flow through those relationships and interactions, strengthening the idea that place is both a part of the matrix of domination as well as where the matrix is plays out.

Place and the matrix work together in a variety of ways. This includes both the ways that the matrix operates differently within different physical and social spaces and how place itself can become an additional layer within the matrix. In these ways, place is deeply connected to the function of the matrix. Furthermore, understanding the importance of these connections also highlights the importance of considering place in research more broadly.

Incorporating place into the concept of intersectionality is not completely unheard of. In 2007, Valentine encouraged the use of intersectionality as a theoretical framework for research in feminist geography because it allows scholars to more

thoroughly consider the complexity and fluidity of identities. Valentine highlights how different facets of a person's identity become more or less salient as they move from one place to another. Furthermore, she uses a case study to show how space impacts the salience of the various identities and oppressions that an individual may possess (Valentine, 2001). Thus people experience their location within the matrix differently depending on their physical location within the world.

During the 2015 Penn Equity Institute for Doctoral Students, Shaun Harper explained that rather than using the term "minority students" he used the term "minoritized". He argued that students from traditionally underrepresented groups in higher education are not in the minority in every situation, but can become minoritized based on the environment they occupy. For example, a Black student at a predominantly White institution might be minoritized in most spaces on the campus, but not at the meeting for the Association of Black Students or an event held by a National Pan-Hellenic Council fraternity or sorority. This provides another example of how the matrix functions differently from place to place.

The importance of physical place is also incorporated into the work of Jaimes and Halsey (1997) who examine Native American women and feminism. They explain that many Native American women reject the identity of feminist because Native American cultures were primarily matriarchal prior to colonialism. Therefore, they see their primary fight for liberation as the fight for decolonization and the acknowledgement of the sovereignty of their nation. Smith (2005) highlights the

centrality of land to this struggle and the belief that true decolonization would also lead to the end of sexism within Native culture.

Gloria Anzaldúa (1987), whose heritage is Native American, as well as Mexican and Spanish, also examines the intersections of race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality, all taking place in a specific geographic location in her book *Borderlands*. These theoretical works provide examples of how incorporating place into the understanding of intersectionality can provide a richer more accurate understanding of the context in which people experience privilege and oppression. In my own work examining the role of place in the experiences of rural students in higher education this is helpful, but not unproblematic.

While these theoretical approaches from Native American and Indigenous women offer a framework for the centrality of land and physical space as a point of oppression, utilizing these frameworks to understand students from rural communities is complicated because many of these students may live on the very land Native Americans are seeking sovereignty over. As previously mentioned, members of rural communities often feel a deep attachment to the physical place of the community, not simply the other community members. The families of these students may have lived for generations on land once occupied by Native American people and their economies have been based on the cultivation, or, for some, exploitation of that land. At the same time, American Indian and Alaska Native students make up a higher percentage of students in rural schools than in any other geographic locale recognized by the NCES (2007), revealing once again the need for an epistemological approach that is complex enough to address the diversity of

students coming from rural communities.

In a study looking specifically at the internal conflicts of rural students moving into higher education, I feel that it would be ethically and intellectually lazy to not acknowledge the internal conflict experienced in the building of the conceptual framework that scaffolds this study. However, this internal conflict does feel reflective of those laid out by Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) in *Borderlands*, which serves as a piece of the conceptual framework for this study. Anzaldúa discusses the complicated past of the Native American, Mexican, and Spanish people and how their continual intermarriage resulted in the *mestizaje*, leaving those today with the task of wrestling with an ancestral lineage that holds a brutal history. Similarly, the ancestors of many rural students are likely implicated in this brutal history. However, once again, it is important to note that with the diversity of rural students many, Native American and Indigenous students are also be coming from rural spaces.

Anzaldúa (1987) also highlights the impact of this place on who a person is and becomes by discussing the 'new consciousness of *la mestiza*. A similar sentiment can be seen in the opening passages from bell hooks (2012) in *Appalachian Elegy* where she discusses the backwoods of Kentucky, and the Black elders she learned from there, as "the root of [her] radical critical consciousness" (p.8). These instances highlight the notion previously presented by Theobald (2011) about the role of place in identity formation, how place can become a part of who a person is. Therefore, if place can become a part of who a person is it can also can impact our position in the Matrix even when the person is away from that place. Considering the role of place within the matrix

of domination while approaching research on rural students should have the dual benefit of both allowing scholars to examine the impact of rurality on the student, and how the students intersecting identities are experienced differently in different spaces, particularly their campus and their rural community.

Domination of rural communities. In the first chapter I highlighted that among the wide variety of definitions for rural spaces many are urban-centric (Cromartie & Bucholtz, 2008). These definitions of rurality, which are created and utilized by federal agencies are evidence of the marginalization of rural spaces. This idea of the domination of rural communities is further demonstrated in the reductionist urban-centric locale coding system of the NCES (n.d.), which merely defines locations based on proximity to urbanized areas and urban clusters.

Bhambra (2007) argues that the typical conception of the modern world is based on "a temporal rupture between a traditional, agrarian past from the modern, industrial present" (p. 1). This explanation highlights how modernist sociological thought regards traditional agrarian life as passé despite its centrality to rural life today. Theobald (2011) explains "*rural* represents the place from which we have come en route to national greatness and international preeminence"(p. 239). These views reveal how rural life can often be "associated with negative qualities—with lack and lag, with 'backwardness,' 'inefficiency,' [and a] 'lack of progress'" (Donehower et al., 2011a, p. 4). These messages have long been reinforced through literature, magazines, television, and cinema (Theobald & Wood, 2010). This means that urban life is not only privileged because of its centrality to modern society but also because it is perceived as superior to rural life.

A critical paradigm is a useful way to approach the study of rural students because it seeks to understand the social norms that impact individuals' lives (Hays & Singh, 2012). Moreover, it focuses on the experiences of marginalized people (Mertens, 2012), making it a particularly good fit for understanding the experiences of students from rural communities. Atkin (2003) argues, "rural people could, and perhaps should, be considered a distinct ethnic group living within a society dominated by an urban majority; in consequence suffering elements of social exclusion often associated with other minority groups" (p. 507). While I personally believe that the term ethnicity is problematic in this statement, I believe that the overall sentiment is valuable. Ethnicity itself can be an ambiguous concept making it difficult to employ in this way; however, it is further complicated by the diversity that exists across rural communities, which could lead to residents of rural areas already claiming an ethnicity, which is separate, but not exclusive, from their rurality. While rurality may not equate to ethnicity, I do believe that rurality serves as a facet of identity that intersects with other facets of identity for people, and more specifically students, within the matrix of domination.

Finally, a critical paradigm seeks to initiate and advance social, and potentially political, changes that will improve the lives of participants (Hays & Singh, 2012). Donehower and colleagues (2011a) discuss the "need to reclaim the rural against the tide of urban bias and policies that favor densely populated areas over lesser-populated ones" (p. 4) and "an ongoing challenge for representing the needs, concerns, and perspectives of rural people and communities" (p. 4). These quotations indicate the importance of addressing concerns of rural students within the context of higher education and the ways

in which higher education relates back to rural communities. Learning about the lived experiences of rural students and sharing their stories broadly can help create better support systems for these students in their hometowns and on their college campuses.

Critical Race Theory

Concepts from Tara Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth model and Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands* emerge from not simply the critical paradigm, but foundational aspects of critical race theory can be found in both works. Critical race theory (CRT) first emerged as a framework in legal studies and many scholars who have worked to bring it into the field of education also call upon scholars such as Chester Pierce and Derek Bell (Solórzano, 1997). While there are various branches of CRT, here I will use the work of Daniel Solórzano (1997) to provide a background for CRT because this is the specific scholar that Yosso (2005) draws from for her community cultural wealth model. Solórzano (1997) focuses on five main tenets of CRT including the centrality and intersectionality of race and racism, challenge to dominant ideology, commitment to social justice, centrality of experiential knowledge, and an interdisciplinary perspective.

Together these theories address complex intersections of identity and oppression, while placing particular value on the resources of the population being studied and their particular ways of knowing. Therefore, aspects from each one can be drawn out to speak to the experiences of students from rural communities in ways that highlight the strengths and resources of these students. Because of their common foundational principles these concepts should work well together and will be combined to create a conceptual framework to guide this study.

Leveraging Rural Resources

Though rural students are often viewed from a deficit perspective, they arrive on college and university campuses with skills and resources developed within that rural context. Students who learn to use those skills and resources in their new context will ultimately be most successful in higher education. One way to understand this idea is looking to Tara Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth model, which in addition to drawing on critical race theory also draws on concepts of cultural and social capital from Bourdieu and Passeron (1977 as cited by Yosso, 2005). Yosso addresses the ways that communities of color are filled with forms of knowledge but also that these are not always "forms of knowledge, skills, and abilities [that] are valued by privileged groups in society" (Yosso, 2005, p. 76), namely the White middle class.

Though other scholars have utilized theories of capital to frame their research of rural students and communities (Atkin, 2003; Byun et al., 2012), Yosso's community cultural wealth model offers a more comprehensive way to understand the rich resources these students bring to campus. The model includes six forms of capital (aspirational, linguistic, familial, social, navigational, and resistant), which combine to form community cultural wealth. While this model focuses on communities of color, the concepts of aspirational, familial, social, and navigational capital may also provide a useful framework for examining the cultural wealth held by students from rural communities.

Aspirational capital speaks to a perseverance and resilience to achieving one's goals and dreams in the face of real or perceived barriers. With so few students from

rural communities enrolling in higher education, matriculating into a college or university is a milestone that rural students have seen few others achieve. In this way, by simply enrolling in college, these students are already exhibiting a form of aspirational capital that they can continue to build upon in their educational endeavors.

Familial capital is the knowledge passed along through *"familia."* Familial capital expands the ideal of kinship beyond the immediate family and draws on community history and cultural intuition. As previously mentioned, a strong sense of community is particularly prevalent in rural areas (Atkin, 2003). Since the concept of familial capital includes an idea of kinship beyond the biological family, the strong ties created within rural communities may provide an additional source of capital for rural students.

Social capital concerns the social networks that a student can draw upon for knowledge, access, and resources to help advance themselves. A study by Byun and colleagues (2012) revealed that social capital process variables were highly correlated to educational aspirations for students from rural communities. Though this study focused on aspirations rather than attainment, it does indicate that this might be another form of capital that rural students may utilize. The scholars in this study admit that this is an area that should be further investigated.

Finally, navigational capital speaks to the skills necessary to navigate social institutions that were created without the student in mind. A lack of research on rural students in higher education reveals that these students are not being considered in meaningful ways as the institutions evolve. As a result, navigational capital is an

important form of capital to consider for rural students as they navigate the social, administrative, and even physical space of postsecondary education.

Once again, while this model was developed by focusing on the assets of communities of color, it could also be helpful for understanding rural communities, which are not mutually exclusive categories. Researchers can use the community cultural wealth model to approach the research of students from rural communities in a way that shows respect for the unique resources and ways of knowing associated with rurality. Furthermore, because society privileges urban spaces and ways of knowing, rural students can tend to be approached from a deficit perspective. Dunstan and Jaeger (2016) found that rural southern Appalachian college students could sense the negative stereotypes that their peers, faculty, and staff attributed to them based on their rurality, particularly being assumed to be less intelligent based on the way they spoke. This echoed a similar sentiment found by Theobald and Wood (2010). They found that

> [s]omewhere along the way, rural students and adults alike seem to have learned that to be rural is to be sup-par, that the condition of living in a rural locale creates deficiencies of various kinds – an educational deficiency in particular. (p.17)

Therefore, the community cultural wealth model is particularly appropriate because it seeks dismantle these deficit perspectives and leverage the resources rural students bring into higher education.

Generating a new worldview

Through their experiences in higher education students encounter new ideas and values. As previously mentioned, many rural communities espouse traditional or conservative values (Atkin, 2003; Dees, 2006) and higher education tends to have a

liberalizing effect on students (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005), a conflict highlighted by Dees in 2006. Therefore, one way that students may need to leverage the various forms of capital that they arrive with, and those they acquire while on campus, is to critically reflect on and integrate the ideas and values from home and campus.

In *Borderlands*, Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) explores her personal experiences growing up in the Rio Grande Valley of Texas "where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds. And before a scab forms it hemorrhages again, the lifeblood of two worlds merging to form a third country - a border culture" (p. 3). The borderlands are a geographic location and a cultural space where Spaniards, Native Americans, and Mexicans created the *mestizaje* through intermarriage. I do not believe it is appropriate to conflate the experiences of rural students straddling the cultures of their home and higher education and those of *la mestiza*; however, some of Anzaldúa's concepts could explain the challenges rural students face in higher education and suggest ways to address those challenges effectively.

Anzaldúa explains that "culture forms our beliefs. We perceive the version of reality that it communicates. Dominant paradigms, predefined concepts that exist as unquestionable, unchallengeable, are transmitted to us through the culture" (p. 16). The struggle occurs when someone straddles the borders of multiple cultures, holding conflicting ideas about the world and, creating "two self-consistent but habitually incompatible frames of reference" (p. 78). Jalomo and Rendón (2004) use similar language to discuss the transition of nontraditional students into college. They explain "nontraditional students must balance living in these multiple worlds while concurrently

learning the values, traditions, conventions, and practices of their new environment" (p. 39). In addition to focusing on students of color Jalomo and Rendón also include low-income, first generation students, those with below average grades, or those who have been out of school for a while, as nontraditional students meaning many rural students could also be included in this category.

While Anzaldúa (1987) speaks of the intersection of her Spanish, Mexican, and American Indian ancestry, rural students can also encounter a conflict of the dominant urban-centric culture with rural culture not just as they enter higher education but also as they continue to straddle the two cultures. Because this study is specifically exploring the ways that rural students negotiate these tensions, concepts from *Borderlands* work together to offer a uniquely appropriate lens through which to begin to understand the experiences of rural students. Moreover, because of the diversity of rural students, many may be attempting to reconcile additional conflicting identities at the same time.

Dees (2006) highlights this conflict in his research on rural college students from Appalachian Kentucky. Through journal entries from their teacher-education course, students expressed the tensions between the culture of their university courses and their home community. As previously indicated, rural communities are characterized by conservative or traditional values (Atkin, 2003; Dees, 2006) and college tends to have a liberalizing effect on those values (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Dees, 2006). Bryan and Simmons (2009) further support this revealing that students also felt that they had to be two different people in order to navigate their transitions back and forth between home and campus. As a result, Anzaldúa's concept of the new consciousness of *la mestiza* may

be salient as rural students seek to cope with this tension.

The "new consciousness" is how *la mestiza* negotiates the tensions between cultures and is based on a "tolerance for ambiguity," by taking a pluralistic stance that embraces the many parts of multiple cultures and creating something new. *La mestiza* seeks to breakdown duality and creates a new way of understanding the world. Anzaldúa explains this process beautifully in the following passage:

> This step is a conscious rupture with all oppressive traditions of all cultures and religions. She communicates that rupture, documents the struggle. She reinterprets history and, using new symbols, she shapes new myths. She adopts new perspectives toward the darkskinned, women, and queers. She strengthens her tolerance (and intolerance) for ambiguity. She is willing to share, to make herself vulnerable to foreign ways of seeing and thinking. She surrenders all notions of safety, of the familiar. Deconstruct, construct. (p. 82)

In the same way, rural students may deconstruct and reconstruct the paradigms of their home communities and their educational environment to create a new system of values or symbols that reflect both cultures and help resolve the internal conflicts they experienced. This newly integrated set of ideas and values may help students be fully engaged with their campus culture without severing important ties to their rural community. It can aid students in negotiating the internal and external conflicts that arise between the culture of their hometown and of their new university campus without having to maintain two separate identities (Dees, 2006; Bryan & Simmons, 2009). While *Borderlands* is focused on *la mestiza* experience, Anzaldúa explains that this ability to straddle multiple cultures and disrupt dominant paradigms will be necessary for the future. That future has arrived and these skills could indicate to rural students how to navigate the space between home and university and reconcile the competing tensions students negotiate as they pursue

their degree.

Working Together

Donehower, Hogg, and Schell (2011b) reveal that rural places and people are often depicted as "lacking educational economic, and cultural resources" (p. xi). As a result, utilizing a critical paradigm is important for approaching the research of rural students in a way that respects and values their unique resources and ways of knowing. Therefore, it is appropriate that the conceptual framework presented here combines concepts from these two works that emerge from critical race epistemologies. This common origin is likely why they speak well to one another and create a more holistic way that scholars can seek to understand students from rural communities.

From *Borderlands*, Anzaldúa's (1987) conception of a new consciousness provides a framework for how rural students can overcome the tensions between the culture of their hometown and of their new university campus without having to maintain two separate identities (Dees, 2006; Bryan & Simmons, 2009). This new consciousness may help students be fully engaged with their campus culture without severing important ties to their rural community. Yosso's (2005) concepts of aspirational, familial, social, and navigational capital offer a way to understand the tools that rural students can use to navigate the transition between home and school and aid in the creation of that new consciousness. The concepts pulled from Yosso's and Anzaldúa's work come together to create a more powerful conceptual framework for understanding the role of rurality within the matrix of domination and how students can navigate it. It also encourages an approach that starts from a positive perspective that values the resources rural students

bring to higher education and how they can leverage those resources in new ways to be successful in higher education and negotiate the tensions between their two cultures.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

With growing interest in the matriculation of rural students into higher education and their success once enrolled, it is important that scholars begin to research the potentially unique needs of these students as well as resources they bring to campus to help them succeed (Greater Texas Foundation, 2015; Pappano, 2017, Texas A&M, 2014). Past research has shown that students from rural communities experience multiple internal and external conflicts as they consider entering and progressing through higher education. These tensions can include a mismatch between a desire to remain in the hometown and the ability of their community to support their career aspirations (Demi, McLaughlin, & Snyder, 2009), concerns about contributing to rural brain drain from their hometown (Petrin, Schafft, & Meece, 2014), and conflicts between the values they were exposed to in their rural community and those they are exposed to on their new campus (Dees, 2006). The ability to negotiate these tensions may play a key role in the success of rural students in higher education. Therefore this phenomenological study used a critical approach to answer the following research questions:

1. How do undergraduate students from rural communities navigate their transitions into higher education?
2. How do undergraduate students from rural communities negotiate tensions they experience within their rural community and within their college campus?

Paradigm and Theoretical Framework

A critical epistemology served as the foundation for this study, allowing me to approach the research in a way that valued the resources and knowledge that students brought from their rural communities into higher education and examine structures, both physical and social, that caused barriers to their success. Out of this critical paradigm emerged a number of theories that were helpful in examining the experiences of rural students. The conceptual framework that served as a scaffold for this study pulled from Tara Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth model and Gloria Anzaldúa's (1987) *Borderlands*. From Yosso's (2005) model I sought to understand how concepts of aspirational, familial, social, and navigational capital also applied to rural students and were leveraged by rural students in their attempt to negotiate these tensions and succeed in higher education. Furthermore, as I sought to understand how students negotiated the tensions of their two communities called upon Anzaldúa's notions of tolerating ambiguity, managing ambivalence, and creating a new consciousness. While other scholars have called upon these theories in their research, they have primarily been used to look at communities of color. I used them in tandem and sought to understand how they might be applied to a new population by using them to study rural students.

Methodology

This phenomenological study explored the lived experiences of rural students who are enrolled full-time at The University of Texas at Austin (UT). The study focused specifically on the experience of transitioning physically, socially, emotionally, and intellectually between the students' rural communities and their college campuses. Using

a phenomenological approach coupled with a critical paradigm allowed me to privilege the knowledge generated by rural students as they experienced the phenomena of negotiating the internal and external conflicts that they encountered as they progressed through higher education and continued to engage with their rural community.

Phenomenology focuses on uncovering the "internal meaning structures" of people's lived experiences (van Manen, 1990, p.10). While the core principles of phenomenology can be found in the work of early philosophers such as Descartes, Husserl is often seen as the starting point for phenomenology (Groenewald, 2004; Eagleton, 1983). As Europe emerged from World War I, Husserl began to argue that it is impossible for us to be certain of the individual existence of things; we can only be certain of how our consciousness perceives the thing (Eagleton, 1983). He further claims, "all realities must be treated as pure 'phenomena,' in terms of their appearance in our mind, and this is the only absolute data from which we can begin" (Eagleton, 1983, p.48). Phenomenology seeks to go "back to the things themselves," to determine the universal essence of a phenomenon, that which is "essential and unchanging about it" (p.48). Moreover, Husserl believed there is a symbiotic relationship between 'being" and 'meaning.' Both are necessarily entangled with one another and one cannot exist without the other.

Phenomenology centers the human experience as the way by which the world and the essence of things and phenomena within the world are knowable. Approaching this study using phenomenology allows me to validate the experiences of rural students, which are often marginalized, as sources of knowledge. Furthermore, it enables me to

examine not just what the internal and external conflicts that rural students experience are but also how the students perceive those experiences, negotiate them, and make meaning out of the process.

This methodological approach also allows scholars to examine the phenomenon within the social context that it occurs. Van Manen (1990) explains that through phenomenology we "come to a fuller grasp of what it means to be in the world as a man, a woman, a child, taking into account the sociocultural and historical traditions that have given meaning to our ways of being in the world" (p.12). Because I was not interested in the experience of college students in general negotiating internal and external conflicts as they navigate college, but specifically the experiences of those students coming from rural communities into higher education, this acknowledgement of impact the sociocultural context and historical traditions on their process of meaning making was important. Utilizing a phenomenological approach allowed me to examine the lived experience of rural students both within the social context of their hometowns and their university campuses.

SITE

Participants for this study were recruited from UT. With the vast majority of Texas being considered rural, it is not surprising that it has the largest population of rural students enrolled in K-12 education in the country (Texas A&M, 2014)[5]. Therefore, leading nonprofit agencies such as Educate Texas (Texas A&M, 2014) and the Greater

[5] See Figures 3.1 & 3.2 for maps highlighting the rural areas of Texas and the demographic makeup of each region.

Texas Foundation (2015) are beginning to look to rural students as a way to increase higher enrollment and graduation numbers in postsecondary education in Texas, making it an excellent space to explore this phenomenon. Texas also has an increasingly diverse rural population, which highlights demographic shifts in rural communities across the country, particularly the rising Latinx population (Lichter, 2012). This is particularly important considering a lack of attention paid to racial diversity in much of the extant literature. All but four of the studies referenced in the previous literature review either did not discuss the race of the participants at all or had a participant pool that was greater than 90% White.

In addition, while little research exists on students in higher education from rural communities, much of the work that has been done focuses on those from Appalachia. Of the 16 empirical studies referenced in the previous literature review, which most closely relate to this study, 10 were conducted in Appalachian states, 2 utilized national data sets, 1 included 21 different states, 2 studies were conducted across the Midwest and in the Deep South, which could include Appalachian students, and the final study was conducted in Northern California. This focus on Appalachian students is not surprising considering the existence of specific academic programs for Appalachian studies and the location of many rural sociology programs and centers for rural education.

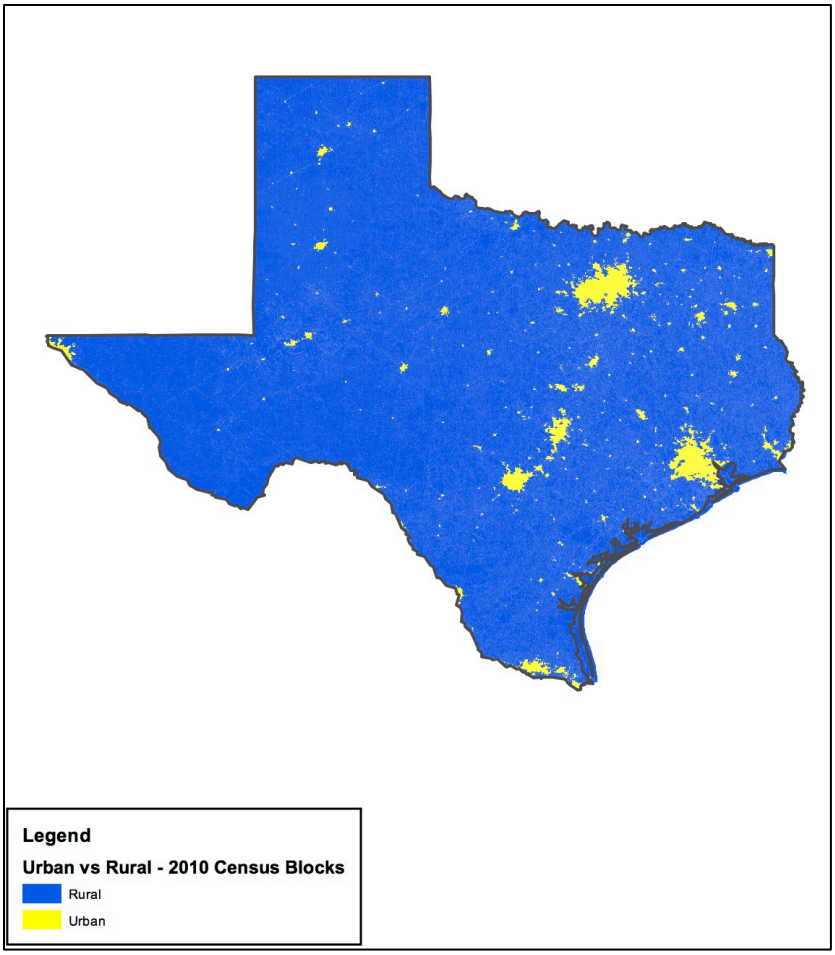

Figure 3.1: Texas rural versus urban census blocks.

Note: Joanna Sanchez at The University of Texas at Austin created this map.

SOURCE: U.S. Census Bureau. Decennial Census 2010.

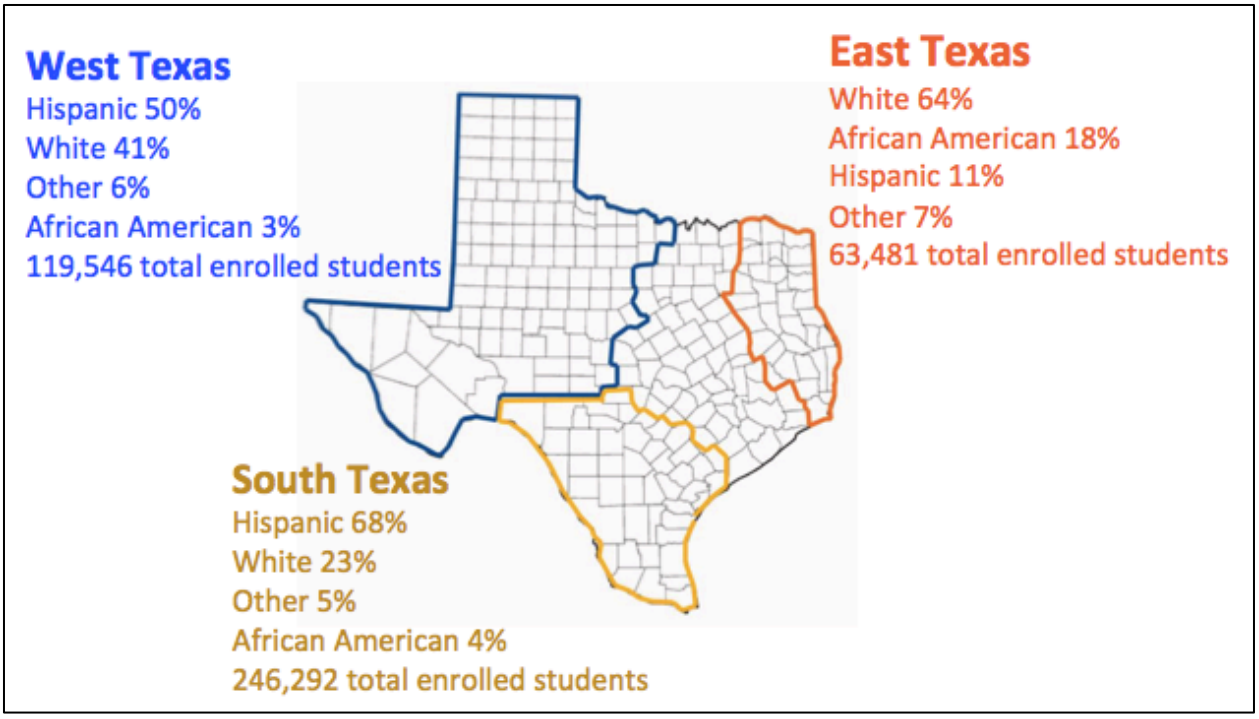

Figure 3.2: Demographic break down of rural students by region

Note: This map, as well as the data that has been added to it, were all pulled from the *Post Secondary Completion in Rural Texas: A Statewide Overview*.

SOURCE: Texas A&M University Bush School of Government and Public Service (2014)

There is an Appalachian Studies Association (2016), which reports that Appalachian State University actually offers a Master of Arts degree in Appalachian Studies and lists five other graduate schools, which offer graduate certificates, minors, or concentrations in Appalachian Studies. Furthermore, the list contains undergraduate majors at two universities and undergraduate minors at eleven colleges and universities.

The Rural Sociological Society (2012) reports six schools that offer graduate degrees in rural sociology or offer rural sociology as a graduate concentration in the United States, with one, Pennsylvania State University falling within the Appalachian region. Four of the remaining five programs fall in states along the Mississippi River including Wisconsin, Iowa, Missouri, and Louisiana. As a result, it is not surprising that much of the research that has been completed on rural education, when not pulled from national data sets, has focused on Appalachia. Focusing on students in Texas expands the scope of work that has previously been done.

Furthermore, much of the research that has been conducted on rural students in higher education has also focused on students in community colleges. This is important work to be sure; however, this study sought to expand upon current literature by examining the experiences of those students enrolled at a four-year institution. Furthermore, it also examined the experience of students transitioning to an urban area.

SAMPLING

This study used a combination of criterion and maximum variation sampling to identify which participants were the best fit for the study. Initially two sets of criteria were used for to select the participants, one for the students and the second for the communities that they came from, to determine which students were most appropriate for the study (Hays & Singh, 2012). Criteria for the students included: 1) enrolled full-time at UT, 2) moved away from the hometown to attend the university,[6] 3) must have

[6] The distance of the student's rural community from UT was not considered, as long as the student has moved away from their hometown to attend the university.

attended a university for more than one year consecutively, and 4) spent at least their high school years in a rural community.

Furthermore, because there are so many different ways to define rural, additional criteria were used to determine which communities should be included in the study (Cromartie & Bucholtz, 2008). In an effort to create boundaries for the study without defining rural communities solely on population density or from a strictly urban-centric system, the following criteria were used: 1) the student identified the community as rural and 2) it fell within the definition of rural or town within the NCES (n.d.) coding system. The study also acknowledged the agency of the rural students to begin defining what rurality is on their own terms.

Once it was been determined that students met these criteria for participation through the initial survey, maximum variation sampling was used to select eleven students to participate in the full study. Maximum variation sampling aided in "illustrat[ing] the central aspects of the research topic" (Hays & Singh, 2012, p.426). Because this study sought to look broadly at the experiences of rural students, and due to the existing, and increasing, diversity of students from rural communities, it was vital that the participants in the study were representative of this diversity. This approach allowed me to look at the students' races, genders, and other identities the student reported as important to them, as well as demographics of the communities the students were coming from. Using this strategy ensured that the diversity of rural students was well represented within the study and helped highlight what was central about the rural experience for

these students. Maximum variation also combats critiques faced by early scholars who often developed theories based solely on the experiences of White male students.

DATA COLLECTION

The data collection process for this study consisted of three main components: an online survey, interviews, and journaling. Students who were interested in the study first completed an online survey to collect demographic information about the students and their hometowns. Once participants were selected, each participated in two in-depth semi-structured interviews modified from Seidman's (2013) phenomenological interviewing structure (Allen & Stone, 2016; Reddick, 2011). Students were also asked to journal throughout this process as an additional form of data collection.

Initial Survey

The initial survey served a dual purpose by both helping to determine which students were the best participants for the research and collecting the initial data for the study. The survey was administered via the online platform Qualtrics. It was distributed widely through recruitment e-mails sent by staff members from a variety of programs at the university. For example, in addition to outreach to the student body more generally, more intentional outreach will also be done to programs that serve minoritized students as well as those which serve first-generation students. Questions in the survey focused on demographic information about the students and their community.[7] In addition to the information from this survey being used to determine which students were most

[7] See Appendix B for a draft version of the online survey.

appropriate to participate in the study, it was also used to help guide parts of the first interview for the students.

Interviews

Seidman (2013) provides a phenomenological interviewing structure that involves three separate interviews with each participant. This study combined the second and third interviews from Seidman's model. Each interview was semi-structured, lasted approximately 45 minutes, and occurred with three days to a week between each one. This spacing helped participants to connect the two interviews, while still allowing time to reflect on the first interview before the second one occurred.

The first interview focused on the participants' life histories. The purpose of this interview was to understand the contexts in which the experience occurred for each participant. Information from the initial survey helped guide some of the questions for this interview. Questions included:[8] a) How would you describe your hometown? b) In your survey you identify your town as rural, what does rural mean to you? and c) Can you describe how you made the choice to go to college?

The second interview focused on the details of the life experience itself and how the students made meaning of those experiences. Seidman (2013) explains that the "combination of exploring the past to clarify the events that led participants to where they are now, and describing the concrete details of their present experience, establishes conditions for reflecting upon what they are now doing in their lives" (p. 22). As previously stated the interviews connected to one another, therefore information from the

[8] Drafts of all the interview protocols can be found in Appendices C and D.

first interview helped inform questions for the second. Examples of questions for the second interview include: a) In our last interview you talked about [a specific] difference between UT and your hometown, what challenges did you experience managing that difference? b) What skills or resources made that process easier? c) Considering the tensions that you mentioned in our last interview, what role do you think your rural background plays in your current experiences on campus? d) In what ways do you see these experiences informing your future plans?

A number of steps were taken to ensure trustworthiness throughout the interview process (Hays & Singh, 2012). First, each interview was recorded and transcribed verbatim and returned to participants to be reviewed for accuracy and to see if they believed they needed to clarify any statements made within the interviews. In addition, analysis occurred simultaneously throughout the interview process. This aided in my understanding of how the interviews connected to and built upon one another. Finally, I completed research memos after each interview to help capture aspects of the interview that may not have been conveyed through the recordings, such as the participants' demeanor, and initial thoughts on emerging themes.

Journaling

Throughout the process of this study students were asked to keep a journal. Each participant was asked to take note each time they experienced a tension between their rural community and their new campus community, or when they encountered a new idea that is in conflict with the values or ideology they came to school with. In addition, students were asked to keep track of any reflections they had concerning the interview

process as they arose between interviews. This portion of data collection lasted approximately two months. It was introduced to the students through the initial email recruiting the students to the process and also during the first interview. Students continued to journal following the final interview and were asked to submit their final entries along with their approval of the final transcripts of their interviews. This allowed me to collect the students' reflections beyond their final interview and any additional thoughts they had as they reviewed their responses to the two interviews. Van Manen (1990) acknowledges the usefulness of journaling in the facilitation of reflection and uncovering relationships they may not have noticed otherwise. Furthermore, he highlights the opportunity for these journals to generate phenomenological knowledge.

DATA ANALYSIS

Analysis of the data began while the data was still being collected so that initial findings could guide the collection process and to increase the trustworthiness of the data (Hays & Singh, 2012). Etic codes drawn from the conceptual framework constituted the first round of coding for each interview. Codes relating to concepts from Anzaldúa's (1987) *Borderlands* included cultural conflict, tolerance for ambiguity, and changing consciousness, and each form of capital within Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth model served as the remaining etic codes.

In addition to the initial etic codes, a second round of open coding was conducted to see what emic codes emerged from the data (Hays and Singh, 2012). This process helped to identify themes outside of the initial conceptual framework. These new themes served to strengthen the initial framework and better explain the experiences of rural

students and identify a more streamlined conceptual framework that should be explored to increase the trustworthiness of the study. Peer debriefing also helped identify potential alternate explanations for findings and further contributed to the trustworthiness. Once the etic and emic codes were identified, an axial coding process was used to determine if relationships existed between the codes. Finally, I also sought to increase the trustworthiness through the triangulation among the data sources of each participant as well as across the participants themselves.

LIMITATIONS

The landscape of higher education is expansive and diverse; however, this study focuses specifically on students who have moved away from their rural communities in order to enroll full-time at UT. It did not examine the experiences of those students who choose to enroll part-time or those who are enrolled in two-year institutions or a broader variety of four-year institutions. Furthermore, it does not address how students who remain in their community as they pursue higher education negotiate the tensions that they encounter. Rural students have a variety of options for pursuing higher education, each with its own unique benefits and challenges. While these experiences should be explored further, they are not addressed in this study.

Furthermore, this study utilized maximum variation as its secondary sampling method in order to represent the diversity of students from rural communities to try and find what about their experiences might be central to rurality, as opposed to other aspects of their identity. However, because such a great diversity exists among rural students their needs will be unique as their other identities intersect with their rurality. This

presents a rich area for future research that surfaced through interviews in this study, but was not explicitly sought out and explored within this study. I do hope to pursue these intersections more in depth in the future.

While the pool of participants was diverse, there were no students who identified as Indigenous or Native American within the sample. This was particularly disappointing since, as previously mentioned, rural spaces are where Native American and American Indian students make up the largest proportion, in addition to the important contributions of Indigenous and Native American scholars to the understanding of land and its centrality to critical work. After my initial call for participants I also attempted to reach out to the Native American and Indigenous Collective; however, I was still unsuccessful. This could have been the result of my own lack of direct relationships or network to these students, skepticism about myself as a White researcher seeking specifically to interview students from the organization, or a lack of rural students in the organization. While their highest population percentages exist within rural spaces, Native American and American Indian students do not solely live in rural spaces and still make up .2% of the student population at UT (Facts & Figures, 2016). This is reflective of the total population of Texas, of which those who identify as American Indian or Alaska Native make up only .25% (Social Explorer, 2017).

Interestingly, there were also no participants who identified as straight White men. Considering this is a stereotypical image of rural America, it could be surprising to some that none of the participants fit this profile. I did reach out directly to two students who fit this profile; however, I did not hear back from them.

POSITIONALITY

While it has been more than 10 years since this moment, I still remember clearly the look of hurt on my mother's face the first time that I referred to my undergraduate university as home. I was sitting in the kitchen of the house where my family lived and she quickly exclaimed, "This is your home!" She was right - wherever my parents live will always be a form of home for me; however, I had also found a place where people cared about me and invested in me in ways that made me feel included, supported, and at home at my university. It was not an easy process for me to find that place where I fit in my new community, but it was important in my persistence to graduation. During my time as the Director for New Student Orientation and Student Support at Southern Methodist University, I would always tell this story at the last parent meeting of each orientation session. I let parents know, that while it might be painful, I hoped they would experience a moment such as this with their students. The support of those from a student's family and hometown are clearly important; however, I believe that students must also find strong relationships and support on campus to balance the pull of those ties to home. While this is important for all students, for rural students who may experience stronger ties to their home community and a greater tension with their new campus, this process may be particularly difficult, but also even more vital to their persistence.

I was one of those rural students. As I caught up with my former classmates at my 10-year high school reunion, I quickly realized that it would not take all 10 fingers to count those of us who had completed a college degree in the decade since our graduation. This means only approximately 10% of my graduating class had obtained an

undergraduate degree in 10 years. In this moment I began to think about my own personal experiences entering into college from a rural community, and the many anecdotes of friends and family who left our small town to pursue higher education, only some of whom completed a degree, even fewer returned to the community with that degree.

I arrived on the campus of Baylor University, and while I came to love it, it took me a great deal of time to find my place. I was teased about my thick accent in the social circles I attempted to join. Inside the classroom no one took the time to mock me, I was simply dismissed. I spent a great deal of time trying to rid myself of this marker of my rural upbringing and as I thought deliberately about how each syllable sounded as it left my mouth, I noticed how I was taken more seriously. To this day there are people in my life who notice how I slip in and out of my accent as I move between my life in the city, my work, and academia, and my life back in my hometown.

While this was prominent in my time as a student and professional at the mid-size private schools of Baylor and SMU, it was less so at Purdue University where I held my first job in student affairs. Though the university itself is nearly 15 times the size of the population of my hometown, it drew from rural communities around the state of Indiana and its focus on agriculture attracted students who wanted to continue a legacy of farming their family land. While the tensions between my rural background and my now professional life were less salient in this environment, they did not disappear. I continued to see myself treated differently in professional spaces when my accent began to creep back in to my speech patterns. I also talked to students from rural communities who

discussed the pull they felt back to their hometowns. They shared about the guilt they felt for leaving their family during the time of harvest when their help was still needed, or their parents not understanding why they would want to spend time and money on a business degree when they could get a good paying job in their hometown right out of high school.

These are the experiences that drive my passion for a better understanding of, and in turn, hopefully doing a better job of serving, rural students in higher education. This passion has informed a previous pilot study looking at the values of rural students that influence their choices concerning higher education and a follow-up study looking more specifically at the values of Latina college students from rural communities. Findings from the initial pilot study further built on extant literature, showing that beyond economic stability students were also committed to pursuing fulfilling careers that aligned with their values. Families were strong influence on the students' values and choices in higher education. And, while the students received support from family and community members, at times it doubled as an overwhelming pressure to succeed.

The findings from these initial studies help to reinforce previous research within a new context and using a different methodological approach. These studies helped frame the study at hand, which sought to move beyond understanding that these internal and external conflicts exist and begin to understand how rural students negotiate them. Once again, my hope is that administrators and faculty members will take the knowledge gained through this study and use it to better meet the needs of rural students and support them as they manage these conflicts and progress through higher education.

As a rural student who moved away from my hometown to pursue a degree, I am an insider to the population centered in this research. Van Manen (1990) highlights the values of drawing on ones personal experience as a starting point for phenomenological research. However, because of this insider status I also used reflexive journaling as an important tool to explore how the process was impacting me, and the decisions that I made concerning the study. Van Manen (1990) also acknowledges the usefulness of journaling for "keeping a record of insights gained, for discerning patterns of the work in progress, for reflecting on previous reflections, for making the activities of research themselves topics for study, and so forth" (p.73). Once again this added to the trustworthiness of the work.

Though I am an insider, rural communities are not monolithic, nor are the students coming out of them, as I have already expressed. Therefore, I find it is also important that I address my positionality as a White woman, particularly as I call upon critical race theories to address a population that is too often imagined as solely White. A number of critical race scholars, particularly feminists of color, have had a vital impact on my understanding of the world, though this is not the reason I called upon their work to frame this study. While it is my goal as an educator to highlight this important work, I am cautious in the ways that I utilize it in my research. It is important to me that I am critically reflexive about my choices to use these theories and concepts and that I am purposeful about the choice and do not appropriate them for work that does not seek to dismantle oppressive and hegemonic social forces. I feel an added responsibility that does not accompany other theories. I do not invoke their work because it is

epistemologically "sexy" in this moment, but because I feel the complexity of their work is necessary to address the complex diversity that exists within rural communities.

Furthermore, as a White researcher who intentionally sought a racially diverse sample of participants, I understood the implications of race in the interview process. I am aware that despite efforts of allyship, my White body can be a symbol of White supremacy that regularly enacts psychological, social, and too often physical violence on students of color. Therefore, building rapport with students of color who chose to participate in the study had the potential to be particularly and understandably difficult, especially as I sought to ask them to discuss details of their life that were intimate and could have made them feel vulnerable. Students who identified as gay, bisexual, or queer, could have similarly felt uncomfortable being vulnerable with me in light of the privilege that I experiences as a heterosexual cis-gender woman.

My personal experience entering higher education from a rural space was an impetus for my interest in research on rural students; however, I understand that it is not representative of all rural experiences. I am excited the opportunity for this research to help expand the understanding of what rurality is and amplify the voices of rural students within higher education. While all students face challenges as they walk onto their college and university campuses, current research suggests that students from rural communities may face unique internal and external conflicts. However, they may also bring unique resources and ways of knowing that research has yet to highlight. This study sought to understand how students from rural communities utilize those resources

to negotiate the tensions they experience and ultimately, hopefully, find a place to call home.

CHAPTER FOUR: THE STUDENTS

In the same way that rural students are not monolithic, neither are the communities that they come from. With this in mind, I actively recruited students who were not only diverse across a number of personal attributes but also the across the demographic and political attributes of their communities. Striving for maximum variation in both personal and community characteristics helped me identify themes that are consistent across rural communities and rural students even as these other variables changed. Ultimately I found that whether the town was predominantly Latinx or predominantly White, Republican or Democratic leaning, and regardless of students' gender, race, or sexual orientation, there were still things that were consistent about how the students understood what it meant to be rural. Furthermore, while not uniform, there was consistency in their experiences transitioning to The University of Texas at Austin and managing their relationships both on campus and with those still in their rural community.

PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS

There were eleven total participants in the study.[9] Eight of the students identified as female and three identified as male (there were no students who identified as trans* or non-binary genders). The small number of men found in the sample is not overly surprising considering the percentage of women represented in the undergraduate population nationally is higher than that of men and, as previously mentioned, this gender disparity is even greater for students from rural communities (NCES, 2014). Three of the

[9] See Figure 4.1 for a chart of participant attributes.

participants identified as Latina, two as Asian, one as African American, and five as White. As mentioned in chapter three there were no students who identified as Indigenous or Native American in the sample. Finally, two of the students explicitly shared that their sexual orientation was important to their identity. Of those two students one identified as queer and one as gay. A third student spoke about his bisexuality within the interviews and how his transition to campus impacted this part of his life; however, he did not share that this was an important aspect of his identity in the initial survey. The African American woman participating in the study also felt her family's socioeconomic status, being upper middle class, was an important part of her identity.

Pseudonym	Age	Race/ Ethnicity	Gender	Classification	School
Katelyn	21	White	Female	Senior	COLA
Christina	21	Hispanic	Female	Senior	CNS
JoAna	19	Asian	Female	Sophomore	COLA
Nick	21	White	Male	Junior	COLA
Emma	20	White	Female	Sophomore	COLA
Tracie	21	African American	Female	Senior	COLA
Sadie	19	White	Female	Sophomore	Social Work
Alex	20	White	Male	Junior	McCombs/COLA
Veronica	21	Latina	Female	Senior	Social Work/COLA
Sophia	21	Hispanic/Mexican	Female	Senior	Education
Jack	19	Asian	Male	Sophomore	McCombs

Figure 4.1: Participant attributes.

The students ranged in age from 19 to 21. Four of the students were sophomores, two were juniors, and five were seniors. All but two of the students came from different majors, with three of the students being double majors. For all three of these students at

least one of their majors was in the College of Liberal Arts. Seven total students were in the College of Liberal Arts, two were part of the School of Social Work, two were part of the McCombs School of Business, and there was one student each from the College of Education and the College of Natural Sciences. While most of the students transferred credits in from their time in high school, two of the students were actually transfer students from other universities. One of the two students transferred into UT after completing an associate's degree at the junior college near his hometown and the other transferred through the Coordinated Admissions Program (CAP) from another university within the UT system.

COMMUNITY ATTRIBUTES

The communities represented a wide range of sizes with the two smallest having a population of approximately 650 and the two largest having a population of approximately 36,000.[10] One of the students, Christina, came from an unincorporated community and two of the students, Tracie and Sophia, came from the same town. The NCES classifies three of the school districts as rural distant and one as rural remote (NCES, 2016). Six of the other school districts fall into the overarching town category with five being classified as town-remote and one identified as town distant. Three of the students attended consolidated school districts. Veronica attended school in a consolidated district that falls within the suburban category; however, if her town had not been included in the consolidation, it would meet the criteria to be considered town fringe.

[10] See Figure 4.2 for a chart of the community attributes.

The most racially homogeneous communities were predominantly Latinx. Of these three communities, one was 98.5% Latinx, a second was almost 90% Latinx, and the final was almost 85% Latinx (Social Explorer, 2017). Another three communities were predominantly White with one of the communities being just over 75% White and the other two having White populations that made up just over 55% of the communities' populations. The other communities were more heterogeneous. Two of the communities had Black populations at almost 30% and another community's Black population made up almost 35% of the total population. For the community with the largest Asian population approximately 5% of the total population identified as Asian. For the community with the largest portion of the population being made up of American Indian or Alaska Natives, this population made up approximately 8% of the community.

The communities were also politically diverse. The countywide election returns show strong political leanings within all but one county. Returns ranged between 65% and 85% for a single party in each of the presidential, senate, and gubernatorial elections since 2012, with eight primarily voting Republican and two voting primarily Democrat (Politico, 2012a, 2012b, 2014a, 2014b, 2016). The final county hovered right around the 50% mark in each election with all of the elections falling in favor of the Democratic Party except for one.

Pseudonym	Locale	Population[11]	Demographics of Town	Political Leaning of County
Katelyn	Rural Distant	600	Heterogeneous	Republican
Christina	Rural Distant	Unincorporated Community	Heterogeneous[12]	Republican
JoAna	Town Remote	5,700	Predominantly Latinx	Democrat
Alex	Rural Remote	700	57% White, 34% African American	Republican
Emma	Town Remote	10,700	Predominantly White	Republican
Tracie	Town Remote	35,800	Heterogeneous	Republican
Sadie	Rural Distant	1,200	Heterogeneous	Republican
Nick	Town Remote	36,100	Predominantly Latinx	Democrat
Veronica	Town Fringe[13]	6,100	Predominantly Latinx	Democrat
Sophia	Town Remote	35,800	Heterogeneous	Republican
Jack	Town Distant	5,700	Heterogeneous	Republican

Figure 4.2 : Community attributes.

PARTICIPANT VIGNETTES

While it is valuable to have an overall understanding of the sample of students who participated in this study, understanding the uniqueness of these individuals further emphasizes the salience of those experiences they had in common. Therefore, before moving on to the findings from this study, I am providing a vignette for each participant that will help paint a clearer picture of who each student is. The following vignettes will highlight the students' personal attributes and the demographic information of their rural

[11] Rounded to the nearest 100.

[12] Because Christina's community is unincorporated, Christina herself reported this information.

[13] Veronica attended school in a district that is classified as suburban large; however, it is a consolidated school district and based on the criteria for the classification system, if her community was not part of the consolidated district it would be considered town fringe.

communities. They will also give a glimpse at the formative experiences that lead students to choose their career paths and to pursue a degree at UT as well as some of the experiences that have shaped them while on campus. Once again, each participant has been given a pseudonym and any other identifying information that could compromise the students' confidentiality has been altered.

Katelyn

At first glance Katelyn may seem to reinforce the misguided stereotypes of rural America. She is a White woman who grew up working on her family's cotton farm and comes from one of the smallest communities represented in the study. Katelyn attended pre-kindergarten through 12th grade in one building with a single hallway. She explained that with only 32 students in the high school, almost everyone needed to play all of the sports in order to field a full team. Katelyn credits growing up on the farm for her intense work ethic. While she had many responsibilities helping on the farm, her family also made her education a priority. She recalls:

> So we always would work on the farm. I remember doing a bunch of homework like while my mom was driving the tractor. I'd just sit in the cab and do my homework there because she was a teacher so we'd go to school, do our sports stuff, and then farm in the evening.

Katelyn recognized that she was fortunate that her counselor was willing to help setup dual credit courses for her. She would conference in to courses at the community college, which was 30 miles away, by computer from her high school. She also recognized that she was fortunate that her mother was a teacher because, while she did have internet access at her home, it was incredibly slow:

> I was so lucky that my mom was a teacher when I was doing my online college stuff in high school, because we didn't have internet in my house. Okay, we have internet in my house, but it doesn't ever work – and if it does, it's like slower than dial up. So I was really fortunate that my mom was a teacher and I had access to the school, so I could stay up there and do my homework, because otherwise there would have been no way.

Despite her parents' commitment to education, Katelyn, the youngest of her siblings, is now a senior and will be the only child in her family to complete a degree thus far.

Katelyn is a double major with each of the two majors allowing her to further explore foreign languages and cultures. Though her family had been in the community for generations, her father was in the military, and as a result she traveled in the summers to be with him. Through those opportunities she fell in love with other cultures, which lead her to pursue majors that would allow her to continue to pursue these passions.

While Katelyn was deeply imbedded in her hometown, she also began to realize as she grew up that her political views were different from the rest of the community, which were "super Republican." As a result, she seldom expressed her views while in her hometown because she did not see a point in "stirring things up." Coming to UT, Katelyn finally felt that she was around people with similar views to her, at least politically. Even though it was difficult in the beginning, she has become more comfortable speaking out about her views on campus. She has found her niche on campus through her college and an on campus job, which has helped break the campus down into smaller parts for her, "like different branches of a family." Katelyn feels that during her time on campus she has become more comfortable with who she is, yet at the same time she has found it to be a strain on her relationships with friends back home.

Christina

Christina is the only participant who grew up in a community that is unincorporated. This means that her community is populated place, but not a census-designated area (Feature Class Definitions, 2017). Despite being unincorporated the community did have its own independent school district and, similar to Katelyn's school, the students went to school in the same building from the time they started kindergarten through their senior year. Christina's parents immigrated to the United States from Mexico and have lived the small community for all of her life. Being the child of immigrants, the heightened rhetoric around immigration, particularly concerning Mexican immigrants like her parents, throughout the 2016 presidential election was particularly frustrating for her. She shared:

> I think the first time I experienced that, where I was like, "Oh, that really hurts me," was when Trump was talking about Mexicans and he made that very popular statement against them saying how Mexicans, illegal immigrants – that hurt because my parents originally were illegal immigrants. And so later on, they obviously worked to get their visa and it took them a long time. I think whenever people started talking about the border, building a wall, I was just like, "That's not the only population... It's not just bad people coming across."

The community that Christina grew up in is half White and half Latinx, with the Latinx families being predominantly Mexican or Mexican-American. She explained that many of the Mexican and Mexican American families work the local dairies, which is hard manual labor. Having grown up watching this work ethic made these harsh mischaracterizations concerning her parents and other people that she grew up with in her community sting even more.

While growing up Christina played basketball from a young age and appreciated the support the small community gave to those who played. Her town did not have a football team and so basketball was the "Friday Night Lights" event of her community. Christina was also one of six students from her high school that participated in an Upward Bound program operated through a regional university. The students made a 45-minute trip to the university two Saturdays a month in order to be a part of the program.

It was a during a site visit that she took with Upward Bound that Christina was first introduced to UT. As soon as she found out that she had been admitted to the university she "was like 'Oh, I'm going to go!' because I was really proud of myself." Christina knew that it was "a huge university and everyone knows it, everyone talks about it being number one. If you have a degree from The University of Texas, 'Oh wow, you're smart. You made it.'" Though she had applied to many universities, Christina felt that she could not pass up the opportunity to attend UT.

During her time at UT, Christina has taken advantage of opportunities that have helped her become more confident in who she is. She has taken the passion she gained for serving children in need as a volunteer in a foster home near where she grew up, to now pursuing a degree in the College of Natural Sciences that will allow her to begin a career in child development. She has also become more comfortable expressing her views while in Austin because she feels like she aligns more with the liberal perspectives here. She explained, "I feel like I'm growing as a person. Also, that's allowed me to be like, 'Hey, this is who I am. They're going to have to deal with it.'" Christina had felt the need to conform to the more conservative views of her hometown while growing up

there and now that she was in Austin she felt more comfortable both exploring and expressing ideas that better aligned with her own point of view.

JoAna

As an Asian woman who identifies as queer and grew up in a predominantly Latinx community, JoAna seems to defy nearly every stereotype that is typically held about rural students. However, she was also an active member of 4H[14] growing up, even serving as an officer in the club, despite the fact that she did not enjoy raising livestock. She recalled:

> I used to be part of 4-H but I hated it. I'm sorry. I know people love it but I hated it because I like looking at animals, but I don't like taking care of a lot of livestock. Yeah, I just realized like, I know how to take care of livestock because I had a goat. Yeah, I know how to catch a goat and I know how to freaking, what's it called, like neuter it. My dad's like "hey, we're going to put these rubber bands around this goats genitals." I'm like "I guess." I try to block that from my mind because it's like something I'm ashamed of. Because no one expects and Asian cowboy.

Though she did not like raising livestock, she continued to participate because she knew it was a potential scholarship opportunity and ultimately she earned a $5,000 scholarship through her participation. JoAna was also constantly aware that being Asian in this small town, she was not who others expected to encounter.

JoAna spent her entire life growing up in the small community that her parents immigrated to for her father to begin his medical practice. After completing his medical degree, her father had the option to move to one of two rural communities in the United

[14] 4-H is a youth development organization where kids "complete hands-on projects in areas like health, science, agriculture, and citizenship in a positive environment where they receive guidance from adult mentors and are encouraged to take on proactive leadership roles" (What is 4-H?, 2017, para. 2)

States, which would help him pay his student loans from medical school. He chose the option in Texas. While JoAna felt that she was unexpected within her hometown, she also recognized that her community was not what people expected from a rural town in Texas. In addition to country music and the two-step, Tejano music and cumbias were also popular in her hometown. She explained that she associated Mexican culture with home:

> It kind of feels familiar when I see a Hispanic group with Mexican food because I'm like that's what I associate with home, which is weird because people are like, "Oh yeah, like cornbread and barbecue" and I'm like "Uh, tacos, fajitas." Yeah, I associate with Mexican culture, which is weird because I'm not even Mexican or Hispanic or Latino, but I associate that with home. So whenever I see that I feel like, "Okay, a part of home."

So, JoAna felt that her hometown broke the stereotypes of rural communities, but then she still felt out of place within the community. She recalls people thinking the food that her family brought to church events was weird, assuming if any new Asian or Asian American families moved into town that they must be related, and assuming that she was a lesbian because she dressed like a tomboy. JoAna discussed feeling constantly bullied and being the subject of intense gossip. All of this kept her motivated to work hard in school so that she could go to UT and "finally be with people who are different, who are more open-minded." She was actively seeking a place that she felt was the opposite of where she grew up.

At UT JoAna has become more comfortable being open about being queer especially as she has spent more time with clubs, and even attended a church, where other LGBTQ people felt comfortable and did not make a big deal about anyone's sexuality.

She has also had the opportunity to seek counseling at the university and is now pursuing a career in mental health services. She wants to reduce the stigma around discussing issues of mental health and seeking support, especially in small towns like the one she grew up in where everyone knows what everyone else is doing.

Alex

Though Alex described his town as "really small," it was the largest community in the study with a population of just over 35,000. Similar to JoAna, Alex also came from a predominantly Latinx community. The community he grew up in is on the border and his mother actually works in Mexico. As a White man growing up in this community, Alex remembers feeling self-conscious when he spoke Spanish and about his accent. He also felt awkward when attending the Catholic mass for his friends' quinceañeras where he felt like he was not really able to participate since he went to a Baptist church. Still, even with these self-conscious moments, Alex felt at home in the town where he grew up. He had a lot of friends and was very involved serving as the drum major for his high school band and working at a local restaurant. Also, while adjusting to UT and getting involved on campus Alex found that people would try to push him toward spaces and organizations that were predominantly White; however, he felt more comfortable with student organizations that were predominantly Latinx.

Alex's mother let him know that not attending college was not an option. She had a bachelor's degree and expected him to get at least a bachelor's degree as well. She had watched his father struggle to remain employed without a degree and wanted to make sure that Alex did not face the same challenges. Alex, who is an extremely pragmatic

young man, took this to heart and began planning out and pursuing his college degree before he even graduated from high school. He shared:

> So I did a lot of AP and dual credit classes in high school, mostly to get my rank in high school up because the most important thing in my life was to graduate with a good rank, which is so funny now, because it means absolutely nothing, but the good side now is that I came in with a lot of credits because of that. Also, knowing that I was going to [go straight into a masters program] and having the problem-solving skills that I have, I was able to find my degree plan before I even applied to college and looked at the degree audit and transfer courses so I could know exactly what courses, dual credit, or AP were good to transfer, what test scores I needed in AP to make sure they transferred, so I planned a lot of my college out before I entered and that was great.

Despite coming into college with so many earned credits, Alex did not slow down once he matriculated. He continued to enroll in 16 to 18 hours each semester and took a full course load in the summer as well. However, he also decided he did not want to graduate early. This meant that Alex decided to take on a second major and minor.

In addition to the many things he was learning in the classroom, Alex appreciated the intellectual conversations that he was able to have outside of the classroom as well. He enjoyed that people were willing to discuss controversial issues and exchange ideas. He explained:

> …I feel at least the majority of people try to understand. Maybe they don't understand, but they try to understand where other people are coming from and they allow the exchanging of ideas. I always thought that was really cool because it always turned into a screaming match when anything like that happened in my hometown.

Alex was one of the only students who did not outwardly claim to be liberal, or to have a more liberal point of view than those he grew up with, but he was also the student who

was the most clear about his enjoyment of the process of exploring various points of view and UT gave him this opportunity.

Emma

While Emma spent her whole life in her hometown, her parents had not grown up there. Despite having been in the town for over 18 years, Emma could still tell that her family was considered new to the community. Her hometown had a rich German heritage and many families who lived in the community could trace their lineage back to the original founders of the town. The town continues to offer German as a second foreign language in the high school, though most students now take Spanish. Emma describes the community as the "quintessential hometown like in the movies." She shared, "We have a Main Street and every single store on Main Street is unique. It is not allowed to be a chain. We have a literal law that it can't be a chain. So it makes it unique." The town also has different festivals and celebrations throughout the year in the town plaza.

Agriculture played a big role in her community as well. The Future Farmers of America (FFA) and 4-H were important organizations for the students in the community and members were often featured in the local paper for their accomplishments. Emma did not participate in FFA or 4-H; however, her father was a farmer and owned a winery, so she was still invested in the agricultural aspect of the community. Emma's parents are divorced, but her mother also still lives in the town and serves on the school board. She explained that this was helpful because her mom would always make sure that she took advantage of the resources available at the school. Though Emma did not participate in

the agricultural organizations she was still very involved in her high school as a member of the drill team and volleyball team.

Emma clearly cared for her hometown but she also loved to travel and explore other cultures, something that she inherited from both of her parents. She shared:

> I enjoy culture and traveling. Like, I know everyone enjoys traveling, but I really enjoy traveling. I wish I could do only that. I wanted to work for National Geographic and just run around and everything… It might have been influenced by my family because we're a little different – my mom is a huge traveler and higher and my dad loves the Pueblo Indian type style. He always has PBS on, which is educational, or like environmental shows, like "Oh, we found this volcano or we found this tomb." That was always on and so it was definitely an influence in that way.

This passion for exploration and learning about other cultures informed Emma's major within the College of Liberal Arts and her desire to pursue her dream job of ultimately curating a museum.

Emma was one of the two transfer students in the study. She was accepted into the CAP program, so she spent her first year of college at a different school in The University of Texas System and only began her time at UT Austin in the Fall of 2016. Despite only recently transferring to the university, Emma has continued to be an incredibly involved student, just as she was in high school. In only a few months she had already joined a spirit organization as well we an organization connected to her major. The size of UT has been overwhelming for Emma at times; however, she has loved the professors in her major and the chances she has already had to network in the department.

Tracie

Tracie was one of only two students who did not move to the rural community that they consider to be their hometown until they were entering high school. Tracie spent the majority of her childhood in Houston; however, she considered her rural community home because she felt it is where she had actually grown the most. As a result, Tracie was one of the only students who actively compared her community to her previous context. Despite having lived in an urban area for so long, Tracie still had many experiences that were similar to her other rural peers.

Tracie was the only Black student who participated in the study and she also came from one of the largest communities, with a population of just over 35,000, and most heterogeneous communities, with the racial and ethnic demographics breaking down to approximately 45% White, 30% Black, and 25% Latinx. Prior to moving to her rural community, Tracie had lived in predominantly White spaces. Though the town was more heterogeneous than others, Tracie explained that it felt very racially segregated and she struggled to figure out where she fit in. She shared:

> I've always hung out with my White friends and I love them and I felt nothing wrong, but I never realized I was trying to figure out – I've always known I'm black, but I never felt like I fit in with the Black people in [my rural community], so I was trying to figure out, "Oh I feel like they think I'm that 'oreo.'"

Though this was an uncomfortable transition for Tracie, she did find her niche in cheerleading. In her hometown sports were and important part of the culture and cheerleading became her sport of choice. She talked about how the people in the town treated athletes like superstars and showed up to events to support them.

Tracie explained that this passion for sports directed the decisions many students made about higher education. In fact, she almost chose where to go to school based on where she would be able to cheer. Tracie was one of only two students who discussed looking out of state to go to school. Her parents had both graduated from a large prestigious public university outside of Texas and she had considered applying there, but due to a misunderstanding she did not complete the application on time. She did apply to multiple in-state schools and ultimately her parents encouraged her to choose UT, even though she had not made the cheer team, over her other options because of the vast opportunities available to her and the strong reputation of the school.

As Tracie transitioned to UT she once again had to confront her race in a new way. Tracie met other Black students who had also struggled to find the place they fit in the schools they came from. She also met other Black students who did not identify as African American, which she had not encountered before. She began to talk to students who identified ethnically and culturally in different ways and learned more about how this impacted their identity and expanded her understanding of the diversity that exists among other ethnic groups.

Tracie also began to embrace her own identity as a feminist while at UT and became more and more confident in her own ideas about the world. These ideas, particularly around feminism, also reinforced concerns she had about the teen pregnancy rate in her hometown and the recent closing of a women's health care clinic in the community. Ultimately she is pursuing a major within the College of Liberal Arts that

will help her understand and address the many challenges faced young women and how to support them as they seek to overcome those challenges.

Sadie

Even though Sadie moved around a lot growing up, most of her time was spent in the small community where she eventually finished high school. Though she moved away from her hometown a few different times while growing up, she considered the other communities that she lived in rural as well. She is a young White woman and her hometown was approximately half Latinx and half White. Sadie was one of three participants who attended a consolidated school. She explained:

> It's not a farming community, that specific town, there are a bunch of other really small communities around it and t hose tend to be more of the farming communities. And there were like seven towns that went together in my high school. And there were only 250 kids in the high school. So it is a bunch of really tiny towns and we all intermingled. It wasn't like we were completely separated from each other.

So, while her own community was rural, the number of students in her high school reveals that even when combined with other local communities the population would still likely be smaller than a majority of the other communities included in this study.

Though some of Sadie's closest friends are from her hometown, she did not enjoy growing up there. She felt like options for who she could grow into, who she could become, were constrained within the community. Sadie explained that it was easy to feel left out in the community if you were not a Christian or if you did not love sports. People also thought it was weird if you really liked school. Not fitting perfectly into the mold of her hometown left Sadie feeling frustrated. She shared:

> I think people wanting you to be so badly one way made me not want to be that way. I think that like in small towns there tends to be a lot of gossip and I found that really aggravating. So I don't know. People were really mean and I didn't want to be mean. The smaller the town the more people know about everybody. It made me not want to live in a small town anymore.

As a result, Sadie was particularly excited not just to leave her hometown but also to come to Austin where "there are a lot of different kinds of people from where I grew up." She also "liked that it was weird," which is not surprising for a young woman who felt people looked at her as "weird" while she was growing up.

After spending some time in Austin, Sadie has decided that living in a city is a little too overwhelming. She found the transition to such a large campus particularly difficult and worked to enroll in smaller class and meet people through her on-campus job to help make the campus feel more manageable. Since she does not want to return to a small town like the one she group up in, Sadie hopes to live in a suburb once she has finished school. She felt this could be a good compromise between the things she enjoys about living in a rural community, such as people being a bit more spread out, and still having access to the city, where there are more things to do. Sadie also feels that a suburb would be a good place to open a private practice for social work, which is one of her long-term career goals.

Nick

The community that Nick grew up in was one of the smallest in the study with just over 650 people. As a White man Nick was part of the racial majority in his town with 60% of the population identifying as White; however, the community also had the largest percentages of the population identifying as Black or Asian of any other

community in the study at 35% and 5.5% respectively. When Nick described his town he shared about how he could see that it was once a lively place, but had deteriorated over the years, saying:

> It's a very rundown town. You can see that it was a very, very bustling town beforehand. You can see the remnants of that. You can see where the old sidewalks used to be, all the nice houses. There's some historical Victorian homes in town that are on the historical landmark registry, or whatever you want to call that, that are still maintained, but others – lots are falling apart. And you can still see where there used to be an old section of town, but they are just woods now. I would walk on the roads and you could see where it used to be.

Nick was clearly invested in his hometown and while most of the students discussed how they were involved in their high school, he shared about his involvement in the town itself, having served with the volunteer fire department for three years.

Nick was also the second participant who attended a consolidated school and he explained that many of the teachers commuted from larger towns outside of the two counties represented by the school district. He was the only student in the study who had not planned to attend college or a university while he was in high school; however, he did mention one of his teachers who told him he should become a professor some day. He explained:

> I've always loved reading about government and paying attention to that, and history. I just had so many interests all the time, and I would constantly – when we got internet access, everyone would tease me, but I would just – I'd read whole Wikipedia pages constantly, just taking in knowledge. But I was always considered encyclopedic at my school, and everyone always had high expectations of me.

Still, after graduation Nick began working with his brother-in-law installing and servicing air conditioners. The job paid well, but Nick hated the type of work he was doing. He

considered entering an emergency medical technician training program, but his stepsister encouraged him to enroll in the local junior college and explore what kind of career he might want while pursuing an associate's degree.

Nick was the second transfer student to volunteer to participate in the study. He did complete his associate's degree prior to arriving at UT just as his stepsister had encouraged him to do. While at UT, Nick is continuing to pursue his love of government, history, and the law through his major in the College of Liberal Arts. Though his transition to Austin was very lonely at first, he has found support and community though the office that he is a student worker for. He has also felt more comfortable being open about his identity as a gay man at UT, after avoiding coming out while he still lived in his hometown.

Veronica

Veronica is a young Latina who grew up in a predominantly Latinx community surrounded by her extended family. Her community is the most homogeneous of those represented in the study at over 98% Latinx. Veronica described her town in this way:

> It is predominantly Mexican, if not all Mexican. People are undocumented. People have legal status. There's one HEB and that is it. There are like Mexican candy stores everywhere, which is really odd. And we have like, they're called drive-throughs, but not for fast food, for like - We call them antojitos. So, it could be fore anything. It could be for cheese or elote en vaso, just stuff like that, or even alcoholic beverages. So yeah, we have a lot of those around, and then they also have raspas and all of that cultural stuff.

She noticed that the Mexican culture was imbedded into the town. Veronica regularly uses Spanish references or phrases as she speaks, which is also indicative of the culture of her of the community she grew up in. She explained that many of the teachers in high

school would speak in Spanish the majority of the time. However, she also expressed that she has been less comfortable speaking Spanish freely since the 2016 presidential election.

For Veronica her extended family was a part of her community. Her uncles, aunts, and cousins all lived near by and she grew up always being able to spend time with them and their children. While her older sister attended UT, Veronica did not want to just follow in her sister's footsteps. She worked to carve out her own path at UT and even in places where their experiences did overlap, she worked hard to set herself apart. Having so many family members in the community has also increased the expectation that she will return home when she finishes her degree at UT. She explained:

> And even staying in Austin is frowned upon, because you're supposed to live in the house. My aunt – Oh, my god! On Thanksgiving, she was like "Are you coming back?" I was like "no." Then she said "But you have to stay in your mom's house until you get married." What the heck?!

Veronica was frustrated by this mindset and felt that many of her friends who remained in her hometown, or were planning to return as soon as they graduated, were settling. She was not only not planning to return to the community after graduation, but was actively pursuing opportunities to work abroad for a year or two before she returns to graduate school.

During her time at UT, Veronica has connected to her Latinx roots in new ways through her academic pursuits as well as her involvement in a Latina-founded and focused sorority. Through these experiences she had developed a passion for addressing issues she sees facing Latinx populations globally. She hopes to apply the skills that she

gained through the pursuit of her degree in Social Work to meet the needs in of others both at home and abroad.

Sophia

Sophia is from the same rural community as Tracie; however, Sophia was born and raised there. These are the only two participants who came from the same hometown. Sophia is the daughter of Mexican immigrants who worked hard to help her pursue her dreams. Though her mother had hoped she would stay closer to home, she continued to be supportive of Sophia as she pursued her degree. Sophia was inspired by the work ethic of her parents and while there were moments that she felt like she should be at home helping them with their business, she ultimately knew that staying in school would help her provide for her family more long term.

Growing up in a strict Catholic household, Sophia was in church every Sunday and Wednesday and was at home most of the time that she was not in school or at band practice. Looking back she believes it was this strict environment that helped her succeed in high school. She credited her high grades with not having anything else to do. Despite her focus on school, Sophia did not really begin to consider higher education until she began taking AP courses at her high school. Surrounded by other students constantly talking about college encouraged her to begin considering the option for herself and ultimately cemented for her that she should pursue a degree.

When deciding where to go to school, Sophia was excited by the idea that UT would challenge her because "it's very liberal and completely different from her [hometown]." While it was scary at first she eventually embraced this challenge. As she

encountered and began to research different ideas, her own point of view started to shift. She explained:

> I guess coming to Austin it was a complete 180, just because like, "Oh, there's people of color and all of these different backgrounds and stuff." And at first I was a little scared of it, because I was like "Wait, no, I know my values and I'm a strong individual. I'm pretty sure I'll stay the same." But then I get to Austin and I want to say it was the best choice I've ever made, the most accidental choice. I loved it. It made me who I am.

So, while Sophia's values began to change during her time at UT, she decided that these changes were not something to be feared, but to be embraced. She understood that these changes could make interactions with people from back home a bit more challenging. As a result, Sophia typically chose to avoid topics she felt would be controversial when she returned home; however, when these topics arose, she was not afraid to stand up for the new positions she held and to provide the research that led her to these conclusions.

Jack

The rural community that Jack considers to be his hometown is one of the most heterogeneous in the study, with a similar breakdown in racial and ethnic diversity as Sophia and Tracie's community. Jack's hometown is approximately 40% Latinx, 30% Black, 25% White. The remaining 5% of the population is comprised of people who identify as Asian, American Indian or Native Alaskan, or as multiracial. As a young Asian man, even with the heterogeneous nature of his rural community, there were few others who identified similarly to him.

Jack was the second student who only lived in the rural community that he considered to be his hometown during his high school years. However, different from

Tracie, he had lived in a rural community in another state prior to moving to what he now considers his hometown. Therefore there was less of a contrast for him between the two spaces. He explained that he considers the community in Texas his hometown because he feels a more sentimental attachment to it, having spent his high school years there. Still, despite this sentimental attachment a common theme throughout Jack's interviews was that he saw the town as a "starting point." Socially, when he and his friends wanted to do something they would meet up and drive 45 minutes to the closest small city. He also saw it as a starting point for his own personal growth; however, he did not see a future there. He did not see it as a place where he could continue to grow.

During high school Jack pushed himself to get involved in different clubs and be more outgoing than he naturally cared to be. He recalled:

> I decided in the middle of my high school years, "I'm going to change my personality and see how it goes." So I decided to be really outgoing and just try to see where that got me…I'm kind of introverted. So I like staying home sometimes, but at my high school, at my hometown, staying home all day would be kind of boring… So I joined a bunch of clubs in [my hometown] and embraced going out there, being active, and trying to make a change. But at the same time, at the end of the day I'm always really exhausted.

Though this practice was exhausting, Jack felt that it helped him as he began trying to get involved at UT. He shared that his skills were transferable, but that everything was just on a much larger scale at UT, a scale that at times was overwhelming.

Personal growth is important to Jack and something that he actively thinks about on a regular basis. One of the reasons he appreciates UT is the opportunity that he has had to meet and get to know people from so many different backgrounds. Even though he came from one of the most diverse communities represented in the study, he still felt

his opportunities to learn and grow from others were limited within his hometown. His involvement on campus and interactions with others he met through the McCombs School of Business allowed him to grow in ways that he felt he would not have access to had he remained in his rural community. With this mind, Jack shared that while it makes him uncomfortable, he feels a certain judgment toward his friends who chose to stay at home.

Many Students, One Choice

Listening to the stories of these students it can be easy to feel that their time in a rural community is the only thing that they have in common. There identities varied across race, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation. They came from different family structures and their parents had a range of education levels. For those who were the children of immigrants, their parents came to America under very different circumstances. One student's family had lived in their community for generations, while others only moved to the community as they were entering high school. Finally, the communities themselves varied greatly in population size, demographics, and political leanings. Understanding these profound differences, makes it all the more remarkable when commonalities arise among the experiences of these students. For example, despite their varied backgrounds, each one ultimately made the same decision to pursue a degree at The University of Texas at Austin.

UNIVERSITY PROFILE

The University of Texas at Austin is the flagship university in The University of Texas System. It is an R1 university with 18 schools and colleges and an undergraduate student population of almost 40,000 students (Facts & Figures, 2016). This means that the undergraduate student population alone is larger than the population of the largest community represented in the study. There are slightly more women at the university making up 51.1% of the student population. White students make up the largest portion of the student body at 45.1%. Latinx students make up 19.5% of the student population, Asian American students represent 17.2%, and Black students comprise 3.9%. Only .2% of the student population identifies as Native American, which once is in line with the population in the state as a whole, but may also be a contributing factor to not being able to secure a participant from this population for this study. Since UT Austin is a state institution, approximately 79% of the students are from Texas. Of the remaining students, almost 10% are international and the 11% of out-of-state students represent all of the other 49 states.

Of course the students did not solely transition to the university campus but also to the city of Austin. Austin has a total population of just over 887,000 with 49% of the population identifying as White, 34.5% identifying as Latinx, 6.5% identifying as Asian American, .2% identifying as American Indian or Alaska Native, and 2.5% identifying as multiracial (Social Explorer, 2017). Seven and a half percent of the city's population identifies as Black; however, the number of Black people living in the city has been dwindling. In an issue brief for The Institute for Urban Policy Research and Analysis at

The University of Texas at Austin, Dr. Eric Tang and Dr. Chunhui Ren (2014) explain that Austin is one of the fastest growing cities in the country; however, among the top ten fastest growing cities, it is the only one that has experienced "a net loss in its African-American population" (p.1). The city lost 5.4% of its Black population between 2000 and 2010. This was the only racial group that experienced a decline during that decade. Tang and Ren (2014) highlight that while Austin has a reputation for being progressive, continued structural inequalities have compelled the Black population in Austin to leave. Many describe the city as a blue dot in a red state. Though not the only blue dot in the state, Travis County, which contains the bulk of Austin, has consistently been won by the Democratic Party in every presidential, senate, and gubernatorial election since 2012, while all of the surrounding counties have voted Republican.

Knowing about the demographics and culture of the university and surrounding city as well as characteristics of the rural communities students are transitioning from helps to support a more thorough understanding of the transition the students who participated in this study were making. In addition to highlighting the themes that remerged in response to the two research questions, the next chapter will also go beyond simple descriptive statistics concerning the students hometowns and examine how the students understand what it means to be rural and why they identify their communities as such. This process provided context to the study that simple statistics and descriptors concerning the communities could not achieve.

CHAPTER FIVE: FINDINGS

As mentioned in the first chapter, one of the major challenges faced by scholars examining rural communities and the students who come from them is choosing how to define rural. Not only are there a multitude of definitions available through state and federal agencies but also many of those definitions can be problematic in their urban-centric nature. Because of these challenges, one aspect of the criteria for inclusion in the study was that all students had to self-identify as rural. Therefore, in addition to addressing the two research questions, "How do undergraduate students from rural communities navigate their transitions into higher education?" and "How do undergraduate students from rural communities negotiate tensions they experience within their rural community and within their college campus?" it was also important to examine why they considered their community to be rural and how they defined the term for themselves.

As a result, I will begin this chapter by first sharing the common characteristics used by participants to define the term rural. I then share the additional community characteristics common across each students' description of his or her own community, but not included in their personal definitions of what it means to be rural. Once I have established this context, I will share the findings specific to each research question. While these findings are representative of students with a diverse set of racial, ethnic, gender, and sexual orientation identities, which intersect with their rurality, and who come from a demographically and politically diverse set of communities, they are still

limited to communities within Texas and students who made an active choice to attend The University of Texas at Austin.

What It Means to Be Rural

Despite the diversity represented among the students and communities, there were distinct themes that emerged concerning how the students defined rural for themselves and how they discussed their hometowns as being rural. Common threads that emerged included the community's comparative size, space, and relationship to nature. All of the students spoke about the small size of a community, the amount of space within the community and between the community and other resources, and the importance of nature within the community as characteristics of what it means to be rural. While scholars of rural communities and students have pushed back against urban-centric definitions of rural, these urban-centric constructs remained evident amongst some of the students' conceptions of rural as they continued to explain rural as "not a city," or as being far from a city. Still, when pressed, even these students were able to offer characteristics that help define what is rural on its own terms.

Size

One of the most common themes among each student's definition of rural was the size of the community being small. This allusion to size was not always specifically about the physical boundaries of the communities but also spoke to the size of the population of the town, their high school, and the number of roads and resources available in the community. Students from the smallest schools mentioned that their

peers at UT often assumed they had attended private schools because their graduating classes were so small. Though none of the students offered specific parameters for how small a community would need to be in order to be considered rural, they did offer some common language to describe the size of these small communities. Repeatedly the students would claim, "there is only one" of various things in the community, particularly that there was only one high school. In fact, each student used this phrasing at least once during his or her two interviews. As Tracie explained, most people think of it as "a place with one of everything…you have that one grocery store, even if it's a Wal-Mart and then an HEB, one of everything. One school here. You have the signature gas station over here." Sadie shared that in her community "there are no streetlights. There's like a gas station and a post office and a snow cone stand. Elementary school. And that's about it." This idea that there was only one of various things also related to other aspects of the community, including how everyone's lives overlap within it and its isolation from other resources, which will be discussed in the following section.

Space

When discussing what rural meant to them, the concept of space arose for participants in two different ways. Frist, the students regularly talked about how things are spread out within their hometowns. There was more physical space between homes and buildings and people had more physical personal space to move around in. Second, students often mentioned how far away other communities and resources were from their hometowns. Christina shared that "people are kind of like far away from each other. It's not like a suburban area where you have this row of houses. It's more spread out." And

Jack explained, "I felt like a lot of the community would just go to the school in the center of town for the daily activities but once we left it was like we were all spread out and it wasn't too concentrated." While both Christina and Jack talked about homes and buildings being spread out, Veronica also talked about having more personal space. For example, she discussed that the local grocery store at home is never too crowded and you can walk around without feeling like you are physically bumping into everyone.

In addition to things being spread out within the communities, students also spoke about the isolation of their hometowns, often using the clichéd language of being "in the middle of nowhere." In addition to students' discussion about only having "one of things" in their hometowns, they also discussed the things that were not located within their communities. They talked about having to drive thirty minutes to an hour to get to the nearest movie theatre or go shopping for new school clothes. Emma explained:

> If you want to do legitimate shopping for school clothes or something, you go to [the nearest city]. And that's just normal to us. I'm used to that. Other people I realize are like, "Oh, I don't want to go there, like it's an hour away." And I'm like, "What do you mean? That's a day trip." So, we have to drive far away to do things.

Because students needed to travel so far to get certain things they had to really want them to make the trip worthwhile. Katelyn, who came from one of the smallest and most remote communities, shared that her family would typically only go grocery shopping once a month because they would need to drive so far to get to the store. She also explained, "If you wanted something you really had to go get it. Like you had to make sure that's what you wanted. And you had to plan an entire day trip to go get it." Because you could not just walk to the pharmacy down the block if your forgot

something, you had to really think through a trip to the store and make sure you got everything that you needed.

Students also experienced these restrictions when it came to academic resources. There were often limitations to the number and types of advanced placement (AP) and dual credit courses available to the students at their high schools and for some of the students the closest community college or university was over 45 minutes away. The challenges that this posed for students as they sought to enter higher education will be explored further in the context of their aspirations to attend higher education later in this chapter.

Nature

Nature was also a central theme to students' discussion of their hometowns. Dirt, the land, weather, agriculture, and even the stars were all things that students talked about when defining what it meant to be rural. Many, though not all, of the students included nature in their actual definitions or understanding of what is rural; however, nature arose as a theme in each students' discussion of their hometown. Still, it manifested in different ways across the different communities. Nick explained that to him rural meant:

> More open countryside and more farming going on…a lot of open space and a lot of open fields. People lived on gravel roads and dirt roads and stuff like that. The driveway to my house wasn't even paved, so you had to have a four wheel drive truck to get up to it.

Here Nick not only emphasized the importance of nature in his understanding of rural but also reemphasized the idea of space that was so prevalent across the students definitions' of rurality.

As suggested by the literature reviewed in chapter two, many of the economies were land based (Atkin, 2003; Donehower et al., 2011a; Howley & Howley, 2010). Emma's father owned a winery and Katelyn's family farmed cotton. Tracie mentioned people having longhorn cattle in their front yard as a type of status symbol within her hometown and Veronica talked about the chickens people raised wondering around her town. She recalled one time "there were chickens everywhere. I was like, 'Yo! Come on! Manage your chickens!' My mom was laughing. I was like, 'That's not funny. That's his money right there leaving.'"

JoAna also explained that her community falls into what is known as "the winter garden district, which kind of literally means even in the winter you can still grow crops and all sorts of things." Because of this dependence on agriculture both JoAna and Katelyn spoke specifically about the importance of the weather, particularly rain. Katelyn noted that she does not see rain gauges around campus or in Austin, but where she comes from rain gauges are important because "everyone has farms. And just like if it rains there's an entire hour dedicated on the radio to which farms and which people got how many inches of rain and just like commentary on it." The rain impacts the livelihood of so many in the community that it is something that everyone keeps track of. JoAna's town experienced an oil boom while she was growing up, which shifted the economy, though it continued to be land based.

Another aspect of the nature that Katelyn highlighted was how beautiful the stars are out in rural spaces. This is also something that Alex talked about in his interview, saying:

> Also like seeing the stars, everyone says I'm so dramatic when I come back from home and I'm like "man, you can't even see the stars." They're like "you can see one right there." I'm like "you see one star, that's not seeing the stars. Come to my backyard basically in the middle of nowhere you can see the stars." So I guess I appreciate the little things now… It's a nice little treat to be able to go home, and you know, not hear everything and be able to see the stars.

For Alex, while he was excited to move to a city and enjoyed the conveniences of Austin, it also made him appreciate the aspects of nature that he had access to back in his hometown that were not available to him in the city.

Summarizing What it Means to be Rural

Small size, physical space, and the importance of nature were central to what the participants felt it meant to be rural. Though these characteristics can be found in other definitions of rural offered by scholars and government agencies (Atkins, 2003; Cromartie & Bucholtz, 2008), it was still a critical component of this study to allow students the agency to define the term for themselves and claim it as an identifier for their community. This approach offered a deeper understanding of how the students made meaning of their own rurality and provides important context for understanding the other themes that emerged concerning the research questions for the study.

ATTRIBUTES OF COMMUNITIES

While the definitions of rural offered by participants included the concepts of size, space, and nature, there were other attributes that were common across all of the students' descriptions of their hometowns that fell outside of the definitions they offered. The communities being close-knit and conservative were themes that stretched across each student's interviews. These attributes continue to develop the context in which

student made choices concerning higher education and gained the skills and values they arrived on campus with.

Close-Knit Communities

As previously mentioned, many rural scholars have acknowledged the strong attachment people in rural communities have to both the physical spaces of their community as well as the people within it (Atkin, 2003; Bryan & Simmons, 2009; Hektner, 1995; Wright, 2012). While students' understanding of nature as an integral part of rurality and their communities might shed light on students' attachment to the physical space of their towns, a number of themes emerged to help better explain their attachment to the people within the community. These themes include families staying in the community for generations, the variety of ways people's lives overlap, and the ways people are watched, discussed, and supported throughout the community.

One reason for rural communities being close-knit is that families often stay in the communities for generations. Emma talked about "the originals" in her interview. These were people who still lived in the community who were decedents of those who had originally founded the town. She explained, "A lot of my friends are originals, meaning their literal great great grandparents founded the town, made the roads, and their families have lived there ever since." So the last names of these families signify that they have been there for generations. Emma's parents moved to the town before she was born, but she still noted that it was odd that they were not originals. Tracie's family moved to her town just before she entered high school. She noted that names were a big deal in her hometown also, "last names are big – I never realized it's a big deal. You can see a

family tree like randomly and you're like, 'Oh, so y'all are related.' Like 'Yeah, that's my cousin.'" These family legacies were also evident at school.

> I couldn't even fathom how many people's parents literally met in that high school or because they had a class with my actual teacher who had them and had them at an early age. And I'll never forget someone, my biology teacher, looked at one of my friends, her last name, was like; "I had both of your parents in my class. Your father did so and so."

This quote reveals how some of the social networks that existed within the community had been established over generations.

In addition to these bonds being built over generations, another reason that the community becomes so tightly knit together is because of the many ways in which people's lives overlap. Jack highlighted that "living in a small town and being raised there, you got really used to seeing everybody like in the same classes, in the same clubs." Alex discussed how this went beyond school and contrasted it with what he expected it would be like in a city claiming, "from Dallas you probably have like your friends out here, friends that you went to Boy Scouts with, or your friends in your church and stuff, and it was just like they were all the same, you know." Many of the students talked about the ways that they connected with people in their community in multiple ways, having multiple classes, extracurricular activities, and community involvement all with the same people. With "only one" of things in the community everyone is constantly using the same resources or involved in the same activities, constantly increasing the ways that students' lives overlap with one another.

These close bonds produced multiple effects within the communities including support for the students but also having everyone know everything about each other and

the potential for gossip. Most of the students found their communities to be incredibly supportive when they saw families in need or for the extra curricular activities of students in the community. Emma shared, "You had a really strong community. If someone passed away in the community, or some tragedy happened, everyone would know, so everyone would rally for it and really support the family." The support also manifested in the communities' enthusiastic support of school clubs and sports in the community. Christina shared:

> The community was really involved and everyone supported each other… the two [examples] that come to mind are each year, each class raffles something off to earn money for their class and so the whole community buys raffle tickets. So you can go up to someone and they will be like, "Yeah definitely, I'll buy something." And ever since I was in the third grade, when I started doing peewee basketball, until I was in high school– we only had basketball because we didn't have any other sports… And basketball was like our football and so "Friday Night Lights" were basketball and everyone would come out to support.

While students remembered the support of their communities fondly, they also recalled how everyone not only knows everyone else but also often knows everything about everyone else. This also took the form of gossip, which was a source of frustration for some of the students. As Alex explained there are "so little people that when you did get in trouble everyone knows about it" and Sadie shared that she thought "in small towns there tends to be a lot of gossip and I found that really aggravating." Nick believed that this was because there was little else to in his small town. When everyone in the community knows each other this gossip can spread quickly and have a more concentrated impact.

Despite their frustration with this propensity for gossip, most students appreciated the close-knit nature of their hometown. They understood the value and support that came from being part of a small community and sought out similar connections when they arrived on campus. Listening to students discuss these social connections helped uncover how they were created within the context of their hometown and highlighted the challenges they faced creating new connections at UT, which I will discuss in greater detail later in this chapter. So, while students discussed the extra physical space available to them within their hometowns as part of their definition of rurality, their discussion of their communities revealed that there is also less social space between each person in their hometowns.

Conservatism

Though the students who participated in this study came from communities that represented both Republican and Democratic leanings, every single participant described their community as conservative. While literature has claimed that rural communities are often conservative, this can be an ambiguous term. Therefore, as each student brought up the conservative culture of their hometown I encouraged them to explain what they meant. Two main themes, which were also connected, emerged from students' explanations of this conservatism. First, the churches within the community had an impact well beyond their physical structures and were the primary influencers of the conservative culture. Second, the ideas of conservatism primarily revolved around issues of sexuality and gender.

The conservative culture of the communities was primarily driven by the churches within the community, whether those churches were Catholic, Protestant, or a mixture of both. The make up of the churches within the community was often linked to the ethnic make-up of the community population. Communities that were predominantly Latinx were also predominantly Catholic, those that were predominantly White were also predominantly Protestant, and those that were more heterogeneous racially and ethnically were discussed as having a mixture of Christian denominations that influenced the community. These differences were also regional since the predominantly Latinx, and therefore Catholic, communities were typically located in South or West Texas and the predominantly White and more heterogeneous populations were typically located in Central or East Texas. Though the outcomes of the churches' influence were consistent across all of the communities, I highlight these regional distinctions as a reminder that they exist and that even greater differences may exist as you compare rural students from various regions across the country and that it cannot be assumed the rural experience will be consistent across all regions.

Sophia explained that the influence of Christianity on her community was not always overt, but it could be if norms were pushed too far:

> Overall I guess [my town] is very like "church," so I guess the community itself is like if you weren't going to church on a Sunday people just looked at you a little bit different. There was a pressure to conform to a religion of some sort. And then I remember in high school I was dating someone and he was atheist, and I told my mom and she really flipped out, and then her friends were flipping out too. They're like "You can't date someone like that"…. but I guess if you weren't part of a religion– preferably Christianity. Yes, Christianity had to be it or you're a bit of an outsider.

Here Sophia highlights how Christianity informs the social norms of the community and can create pressure even for those who do not attend a church. Sadie shared how Christianity went beyond the church walls to inform the culture of her hometown, saying:

> There was definitely a lot of prayer in schools, which is weird and I don't think that should have been allowed. But there was a lot of that and a lot of obviously religious events. Like everything was shut down all the time. And that's mainly how people interacted was at church.

In Sadie's hometown not only was Christianity openly expressed inside the schools, but churches served as a social hub for the community as well.

While participants shared that the prevalence of Christianity within their communities was the primary influence for the conservative values espoused the community members, there were also common themes concerning how this conservatism was expressed within the community. The majority of the time these conservative values manifested around sexuality and gender norms. Veronica shared:

> So living with the Catholic point of view, abortion is wrong, pro-life, gay marriage is not a thing, no one is gay, everyone is in the closet if they are gay, or they just don't feel comfortable wasting their opinions about it.

Alex shared a similar culture around gender in his community:

> They're very pro-binary gender in my church, like that's it. If you're born – if the doctor assigns you male, you are a male until the day you die. So you know like there's never been a case of someone like coming out as transgendered or saying that they don't agree with the binary system. When I was growing up, I never experienced any of that, never – it was just like "Oh yeah, I guess it happened somewhere, but not here. And that's very – Like it probably has happened, right? But it's very hush-hush if it does.

Alex also explained that this idea of the gender binary also meant having specific ideas about gender roles within relationships, particularly for women.

JoAna explained that these conservative social norms in her hometown were the source of bullying for her. She recalled:

> People considered me, because I'm kind of like a tomboyish kind of person - I guess I just like comfort. I guess it's a stereotypical thing in rural communities, like if you are considered to be part of the gay community people will attack you emotionally, physically, any other way, which is sadly true I guess. But it doesn't get like intense where people in our community or closeted gays get assaulted. But yeah, it's just usually like emotional abuse and petty fights.

For JoAna, she felt this judgment from others in her community even before she had considered her own sexuality or begun to identify as queer.

Nick also dealt with the conflict between his own identity and the conservative culture of his hometown, sharing:

> I'm a gay male, so that was kind of - It was a little scary, growing up in rural Texas and having that realization come up, and wanting to come out. But surprisingly [my hometown] was more open to people who were gay.

For Nick, this mostly meant that he did not feel it was physically dangerous to be gay in his hometown. He still avoided coming out while he lived in his rural community because of challenges he saw a lesbian student face in his hometown. He explained:

> I just kind of stayed away from coming out there. I came out to my friends later on, but you know, there was a lot of religion, a lot – not so much Catholicism, but Protestant, Baptist, and Methodist.

Once again, there was a direct link between the students' understanding of the conservative values of the town being directly connected to the religious influence of the Christian churches in the community.

Community Attributes as Context

Understanding how students who self-identify as rural conceptualize what it means to be rural and exploring their common community attributes for each of the participants, is a vital step in contextualizing the findings related to their transition to UT. Based on their definitions of rural, the university itself is larger and more crowded than any of their hometowns and is located within rather than isolated from a large urban area. Furthermore, students are leaving a space where almost every aspect of their life overlaps with their peers to enter a place where they may never actually meet some of the peers who sit in their large lecture classes with them. Finally, these students have made an active choice to attend a university that is seen as the more liberal flagship university within the state, and within what is considered to be one of the most liberal cities in Texas. Therefore, this background is crucial for understanding the transition these students are actually making.

TRANSITIONING TO HIGHER EDUCATION

The first research question I sought to address through this study was, "How do undergraduate students from rural communities navigate their transitions into higher education?" During the first interview with each participant I focused on the context in which this phenomenon was occurring. I began by having them describe their hometowns and then their perceptions of the campus and culture of UT. Finally, I had the students discuss how these two spaces were similar to one another and how they were different. In the second interview I focused on what challenges students faced as they transitioned into college and the skills and resources they used to meet those challenges.

It is from this portion of the interviews that the following findings for the first research question arose.

Aspiration

The goals that each student aspired to were the impetus for their transition into college, and more specifically to UT. When talking to students about why they chose to come to college many of them spoke about the opportunities a college degree, and living in a city, could provide them. Though many of the students were pursuing majors and careers that were influenced by their time growing up in a rural community, they still felt that there were greater opportunities to pursue their dreams in the city. Jack explained it in this way:

> I felt like living in the [rural] town was sort of – I didn't really see a future there. It's a small town so I don't think I could have grown as a person in that town. So it's just more of a starting point for me.

While talking about what it was like to grow up in his hometown, Jack shared about how it felt like a starting point. For many of the things he and his friends would want to do, they would meet up and then leave the town, for instance to go see a movie or go shopping. In the same way, while Jack acknowledged that he had grown as a person in the community, he only saw it as a launching point for the rest of his life, rather than a place he could remain. Similarly, Christina shared that she "wanted to see what else [she] could do" and Sophia "want[ed] to branch out". She explained, "I knew I wanted to go out to college and I knew I wanted to be a little further away from [my hometown]." These students were not just interested in going to college but also leaving their town to do so.

While all of the students were specifically seeking to move toward new opportunities, some were also specifically seeking to leave something behind. Sadie and JoAna both wanted to escape the gossip and bullying they faced in their hometowns and Veronica felt that she needed to break away from a mindset that encouraged her to "settle." She shared:

> I feel like a lot of [the other students that came from my hometown] are so stuck in that "I'm going to go back [home], and I'm just going to do this, and I'm going to settle," mindset and I'm like "No!" That is not my mindset anymore. That was my mindset when I was [back home], and even then it wasn't that bad. I knew that I wanted to do something with my life, and I can't be surrounded with people like that. Because then that'll make me want to settle, and that's the last thing that I want.

For Veronica, coming to college is only the first step in seeking opportunities outside of her hometown. She loves her family; however, despite their expectations that she would return home after her graduation, she has plans to continue to explore the world. Veronica was not along in this sentiment. A number of the students discussed graduate school as a part of their future plans. Also, while some of the students discussed moving back to their community as they neared, or after, retirement, none of the participants had plans to move home after their graduation.

It is critical to remember that while the students who participated in this study felt the need to leave their community to pursue opportunities, they were the minority within their hometown. Therefore, it is important to acknowledge that it is not that rural communities do not offer opportunities for young people to stay, but that these students felt those options were limited and had specific aspirations that they felt could not be achieved if they stayed within the community.

Furthermore, that the students specifically chose to attend UT was a decision that placed them in the minority even among those from their hometown who did choose to pursue higher education. Students explained that the majority of their peers who chose to pursue higher education selected the community college or university closest to the community. Three of the students also explained that of those students who left their hometown to attend a large research-intensive university, most chose Texas A&M, which is set in a more rural area and has an emphasis on agriculture. Once again, this highlights that there are resources available to the students closer to home, but those who participated in this study were specifically seeking the opportunities available to them at UT.

When talking about why the students chose UT, each one mentioned the prestige of the university at some point. The students not only wanted to pursue a degree but they wanted to pursue one that they believed would continue to provide them with the most opportunities. Christina explained, "everyone knows it, everyone talks about it being number one. If you have a degree from The University of Texas, 'Oh wow, you're smart. You made it.'" When Nick was choosing where he would transfer to, one of the professors at his junior college encouraged him to apply to UT because of its reputation. He shared:

> I wouldn't give myself the best – I always felt like I was trying to take the mediocre route, and I wasn't going to take the best. So I had a lot of influential professors at [my junior college], but one was a UT alum herself, and she kept saying like, I think you need to go – you need to go to UT, you need to go to UT, that's the best one in Texas. And I thought, "You know, I've always wanted to – I always would have liked to go to UT," but I thought I never would get in.

Nick finally decided to "give himself the best" and applied to UT that semester.

In addition to the general prestige of the university, many of the students also discussed the quality and reputation of the specific program, major, or school they were a part of. In addition to the prestige of the university students also talked about the diversity of the university as well as its more liberal leanings as factors in their choice to come to UT. These last two reasons will be discussed in greater detail in later sections of this chapter.

Elusive resources and illusions of barriers

While the students believed that to fully realize their dreams they needed to pursue the opportunities outside of their hometowns, they did leverage resources within their community to prepare for their transition into higher education. The primary resources that students drew upon were AP and dual credit courses offered at their high schools and the local community colleges and universities. It is important to remember that for some of the students the closest community college or university was 45 minutes to an hour away. As a result, in order to access the resources from those institutions students had to rely on opportunities to be conferenced into courses taking place on campus, have teachers at their high school that had the credentials to teach on behalf of the nearest institution, or have the means to travel to the institution.

Sophia shared that putting herself into AP courses was the first step in changing her mindset about college. She stated:

> I guess I started putting myself into the AP classes and stuff, and that was a different mindset than everybody else, and everybody's talking about college, so I guess that kind of enforced it a little bit too.

This quote shows the role that AP and dual credit courses can play not only in allowing students to gain credit for college courses while still in high school but also in shaping their attitudes toward attending college.

For Alex, access to AP and dual credit courses expanded his options once he arrived at UT. Prior to his high school graduation he took full advantage of the AP and dual credit options available to him as well as additional courses through the community college. Because of the high number of hours he came to college with, Alex will complete two undergraduate degrees, each with its own minor, and a master's degree – all within five years of his arrival at UT.

The AP and dual credit courses were offered in different formats across the various communities. Veronica explained that teachers at her high school would teach the dual credit courses saying, "[T]eachers were certified for both, because some of my teachers would teach dual enrollment for bio, but then they would also teach regular bio" and Katelyn shared that for her, the junior college was 30 minutes away, so they "had those video dual credit classes so they could watch." However, Katelyn also shared the internet access at her house was not sufficient for her to be able to complete the homework for her online courses at home and she was fortunate that her mom was a teacher so that she had access to the internet at the school and could stay until her homework for dual credit courses was complete. So, while technology offered opportunities for students in rural communities, there were also limitations to the

resources available and Katelyn understood her privilege as a teacher's daughter, which allowed her access to resources that helped her to be successful in those courses.

As in Katelyn's case, it is important to acknowledge the access that AP and dual credit courses could offer but also their limitation within rural communities. As Tracie explained, "I couldn't do calculus AP because they only had it in the afternoon, I only had mornings available." She also mentioned, " I just remember because those credits didn't transfer to UT, which is why I never took them." So for Tracie there were resources available; however, she was not convinced they were the best choice for her if she was enrolling at UT.

Sadie also mentioned limitations that she faced related to dual credit and AP courses. She claimed:

> Because it's so in the middle of nowhere we couldn't actually go to the college, so it all had to be online. And the AP classes - nobody even passed the exam for one of the classes. Literally nobody in the history of the school had ever passed it.

Therefore in Sadie's case, while these courses were available she did not find them particularly valuable. One exception was an AP psychology course that she was able to take online. While Sadie moved around a lot growing up, she spent the majority of her time off and on in the rural community she considers her hometown. She had been enrolled in an AP psychology course at another school before moving back to her hometown in the middle of a semester. Sadie wanted to continue the course; however, it was not offered in her rural community because there was no psychology teacher at the high school. In the end her school was able to allow her to finish the course online so that she did not lose credit for the work she had already completed in the course. These

examples of AP and dual credit courses provide an overview of how rural communities are able to offer resources to their students that can be leveraged as they seek to enroll in higher education; however, these resources can also be limited as a result of isolation from local college campuses, poor internet infrastructure, or limited faculty availability.

Three of the participants also discussed Upward Bound programs and GO Centers[15] that helped them connect to their local community colleges and universities. Christina was first introduced to UT through the Upward Bound program she joined that was run through the regional university located 40 minutes away from her hometown. She shared, "I applied to a bunch of universities and I didn't think I would get into UT, but I got in. So I was like, 'Oh, I'm going to go.'" So, the program not only offered her regular exposure to the regional university but also to a variety of other universities across the state.

The GO Center at Sophia and Tracie's school was mostly connected to the community college in their town but had also started new initiatives to encourage college attendance more broadly during their junior year. One way the center sought to motivate students was to post their college acceptance announcements on the library windows. Veronica also spoke of the GO Center in her high school; however, she had some concerns about the advice given through the center. She felt that many students were only being encouraged to meet the minimum requirements to gain admission to the local community or technical college rather than to pursue opportunities at four year

[15] GO Centers are community or high school based college and career centers that are a part of the outreach programs run by the Higher Education Servicing Corporation (HESC) and their sister organization the North Texas Higher Education Authority, Inc. (HESC, 2012).

institutions or schools further away from the community. Also, while many students took advantage of dual credit courses, this was mostly seen as a cost saving measure for students. Veronica expressed concerns that there was little guidance as to how these courses would fit into a degree plan that students might pursue once they matriculated into higher education.

Family

Family played an important role in the students transition into college; however, this played out differently for different students, highlighting yet another aspect of diversity among the participants. For some of the students, their parents had both gone to college and it was a forgone conclusion that they would attend as well. Some students were the children of immigrants and saw obtaining a college degree as the way to fulfill the dreams their parents had fought for them to be able to obtain. Other students pulled on information from siblings or other extended family members as they made their transition. Veronica, JoAna, and Emma all had older siblings who attended UT and Sadie had an uncle who had attended the university.

The motivation that Alex took from his parents was twofold. His mother was always a driving force pushing him toward college; however, he was also impacted by the challenges he saw his father face not having a degree. He explained:

> She's like, "I don't care where you go. I don't care what you study. But you have to at least get an education, at least as much education as I have," because she got her bachelor's degree…. I think part of that is because my dad didn't go to college, so my mom saw how hard it was on him to try to find a job, keep a job.

This reveals that not only is support an important part in considering the transition to college, but watching others, particularly family members, struggle may be one of the motivating factors in students like Alex seeking the opportunities that a college degree can provide, as revealed in the previous section.

Sophia, Christina, and JoAna each spoke about their parents immigrating to the United States and feeling a unique responsibility to their family. Sophia shared:

> For my parents coming from Mexico was a hardship, so I guess it was just like "I want to help them out"… I guess family influenced my career choice a little bit. I mean my parents were never like, "You have to be…" That was pressure I put on myself – But they want to be supportive of any choice – But my mom actually wants me to stay home and live with her forever. They're very supportive of anything I do, but I guess the pressure that I put on myself for my family, that's kind of what influenced my career.

In this quote from Sophia we can again see multiple motivations coming from her parents. She acknowledges the support of her family as she pursues this opportunity but also her own desire to get to a place where she can support her parents.

JoAna discussed how inspired she was by the perseverance of her parents and drew encouragement from their success as she pursues her own degree. She explained:

> It's even amazing how my dad went from – because my parents were poor in the Philippines. My mom came from a single mother who was trying to make things go by. My dad, he was from a family that would recycle oil and do odd jobs as a means to get by. He had a big family compared to my mom, just herself and her mom. So it was just their struggle to make their life better and come to the U.S. inspires me and encourages me.

In addition to the inspiration JoAna drew from seeing her parents overcome these struggles, she also noted how her father's career as a doctor has inspired her to want to enter a helping profession.

While the role of family members in the students' decisions to enter higher education played out differently for each student, family still played a prevalent role in these choices as well as the student's continued motivation as they pursued their degree. Support coupled with the work ethic and perseverance students learned from their family members was a sustaining factor for the students. At the same time, while the support provided to students by their families continued to play an important role in their success as they transitioned into higher education, the support they grew up with in their community did not translate into higher education in the same way.

Community

As previously mentioned, community members often demonstrated a great deal of support for the high school students by participating in fundraisers to support their extracurricular activities and showing up to their competitions and events. This also meant students were regularly featured in the local paper and well known within their communities. This in turn granted the access to, and the ability to leverage, social capital within the community; however, this social capital did not necessarily transfer into their college life. While the previous sections have focused on the impetus and motivation for students' transition into higher education, this section begins to consider the transition itself.

Students experienced support in a few different ways, some of which have already been mentioned. Some of the students had access to programs such as Upward Bound or GO Centers to encourage them to pursue a college degree. Also, as previously mentioned, many students were already accustomed to getting significant support from

their community for their involvement in high school. Tracie described the support she received from people in her community in the following way:

> Everyone [knew] you, no matter what you did. So it really put more perspective of like for me, sporting events, the football games,–you would think they're NFL players, honestly. They love it. The whole city shuts down for it.

She explained, "The high school is a symbol of the town." The "[mascot] is such a big trademark for them, it really is the whole city, like bottom line." This highlights how even in high school students can feel like superstars in these rural towns. Similarly Emma shared:

> The newspaper would – if you were in a sport, in band or FFA, guarantee you were like the hometown hero. The little kids – we would go to the primary school and talk to the little kids if you were in sports, or if you were in FFA, or whatever, and they though you were the coolest thing ever. And you'd be on the front page of the newspaper and it'd be – I wasn't a popular person, but I did play volleyball and I ran track and I was on the dance team, because you were in a lot of things when you're in a small town. So we were – our volleyball team was doing really well my senior year and this random old guy, he's so cute, he like comes up to me and he's like "Oh I'm so excited for y'all." He knew who I was and what position I played, because even people that have not kids left in the school system will still come to all the games and know your face and be rooting for you so hard and it's so precious.

This meant that for most students everyone in the town knew who they were. They had a number of opportunities to gain social capital within the community through extensive involvement in extracurricular activities and finding jobs through family connections and other social networks.

Christina found support from a nurse practitioner she volunteered with who and grown up in her hometown. The nurse practitioner wrote her a letter of recommendation and continues to keep up with her now that she is at UT. Katelyn was able to secure a

summer job with her local library after her grandfather recommended it to her and JoAna found a job for when she returned home over the summer through a family friend. However, even though students were able to gain capital within the community at a young age, they were not necessarily able to leverage it while they were on the UT campus. The attributes of the rural communities that were previously discussed may contribute to this. With many of the social networks in the community building overtime as generation after generation remain in the community, the networks may be insulated from external forces, or socially isolated in the same ways the town is geographically isolated. Therefore, the social capital gained within the community becomes less valuable when the students attempt to leverage it in new spaces. Even for the students who had some knowledge of UT because they had older siblings who attended the university, they discussed their siblings as a way of learning about the university, but not as a resource once they arrived on campus.

Whether students felt like celebrities within their hometown, like they did not quite fit in, they knew everyone and everyone knew them. As a result, one of the challenges students faced as they entered UT was meeting new people and making new friends. While this is a common challenge for students from all types of geographic locations entering higher education, what was unique about how the participants discussed the endeavor of having to make new friends is that many of them had never had to take this on before. As previously mentioned, many of the participants had lived in their communities all of their lives. Also, for the few students who moved into their rural community later in life, having their lives overlap in so many ways with others in the

community made creating connections feel inevitable. So it is important to understand that while all students might be nervous about making new friends, this is not necessarily a skill that student from rural communities have practiced or had opportunities to develop in the same ways.

Jack explained that he "didn't really have that many chances to meet new people and sort of practice socializing compared to these people in big city high schools where they could meet someone new every day if they have really big classes." Christina talked about the challenges of being an introvert on campus, but she also explained:

> I wasn't necessarily an introvert back home. I think I was just comfortable with the friends I had. I didn't feel the need to find someone else or I didn't feel the need to build another group to join because I had already had my set group and so I think that hurt me because I came here and I didn't know what to do with myself because I didn't know how to start out. I'm starting from scratch here.

This highlights how even though she clearly had an established group of friends in her hometown, there was something different about "starting from scratch" at UT. Alex shared a different aspect of this by talking about how uncomfortable he was with making small talk.

> Honestly making friends is harder here, I guess when you're forced to be in the same classrooms with the same people for eight hours a day for 12 years of your life it's really easy to make friends, where in college you have to actually go try to make friends. I've always found it super hard. I don't like small talk with people I don't know, because it feels fake to me. It's just like, "What's your major?" I'm like, "Do you actually really care what I'm studying? Or did you just want to talk?", which I completely respect you wanting to talk to me, but if we're going to talk, let's talk about something that's important to you, or something that matters, something you care about, because honestly you probably don't care what I study, and that turns a lot of people off.

Alex explained that he understands that small talk is a way for people to build trust, but he felt "fake at the beginning trying to push through that but [he doesn't] like it." Once again, for those rural students who have spent their whole life with the same people, they have likely pushed through the small talk a long time ago and already established that trust.

Though there may be unique aspects to the participants' concerns about having to make new friends at college, their strategies for overcoming this challenge were similar to other students. The most effective strategy for the students was to create their own smaller communities on campus through their involvement with on-campus jobs and student organizations. Nick found comfort and support in the office he was a student worker for that helped him cope with the stress and loneliness he felt as he transitioned to UT. He said, "I was glad to find [the office] when I did because I don't think I'd be where I am now. I don't think I'd still be here if I didn't have [the office] to fall back on." Sadie claimed, "Work helps me a lot. That's how I've met most of my friends, is through work because it's like you're around the same people at work." Work offered a common place for her to interact with same people on a more regular basis, which allowed her time to build relationships.

While Sadie and Nick found connections through their on-campus jobs, Jack and Emma were able to find smaller communities to be a part of through their involvement in student organizations. Emma joined a spirit group on campus, which helped her feel "more a part of the community" as well as a smaller organization connected to her major.

Though Jack struggled at first, he eventually found a strategy for making connections at UT, explaining:

> I feel like if you find your niche on campus - If I find a community with the Comic Book Club and just like a group of faces I can sort of familiarize myself with, it would be sort of like seeing the student council back in my high school, where I would see everybody over and over again.

Joining the Comic Book Club helped Jack recreate the feeling of having his life overlap with others, making it easier to get to know them.

Just as the participants were diverse across a wide number of attributes so was their involvement. They joined organizations based on their hobbies and interests, their majors, programming and service organizations, and Greek letter organizations. No matter what type of involvement students pursued, engaging more fully in smaller segments of the campus helped them establish the sense of community they missed from home. Ultimately, when pressed to talk about similarities between their hometowns and UT, these smaller communities they had created within the larger campus reminded them of the small towns they had moved away from. So, even though the students were not able to leverage the social capital they obtained in their hometown on the college campus, they were able to see the value in the support they received in their rural communities and worked to recreate those smaller communities on the UT campus.

Navigating New Spaces

Navigation was yet another theme that arose in multiple ways from the data. Students had to figure out how to make their way through both the physical space of the campus and city to get where they needed to go but they also had to learn how to navigate

the institutional structures and culture of the campus in order to be successful socially and academically. Similar to knowing everyone in their community, students also often knew about everything in their community. This meant that they seemed to have a good idea of what the available resources were and how to use them, even if they felt those resources were limited. Transitioning to such a large campus, students had to learn how to ask for help and utilize the many new resources available to them.

PHYSICAL SPACE

The Forty Acres is a colloquial nickname for the UT campus derived from the original forty acres that the campus inhabited (Texas Admissions, 2017). Today the main campus has expanded more than tenfold, taking up 431 acres (Facts & Figures, 2017). One common challenge the students faced in transitioning to UT's campus was navigating the physical space: students often felt overwhelmed by the size. While students from urban and suburban areas might also feel overwhelmed by the number of new buildings they needed to learn, it is important to put into context that some of these rural students had spent their entire scholastic career in a single building.

As previously mentioned, one of the common traits that students mentioned about their hometowns was that there is only one of most things. This means that students are not just learning the layout of a new place, but a place with far more buildings than they may have previously had to navigate around. Also, all but three of the students had spent their entire life in their small town. This means that even though the students have likely had to navigate new spaces when on one of the previously mentioned shopping trips to

another town or for other events or vacations, this may be the first time they have ever had to navigate a new space that they needed to learn well enough to live in.

Emma always wanted to attend a large university, but admitted that she "may have overshot it" with UT. She shared:

> I always was like "big, big, big. I want to have a really big university." And coming here, it's very overwhelming and just like, "Why did I ever say I wanted a huge university?" I don't know why I said that.

Even though she actively sought out a large university, Emma still felt overwhelmed navigating her campus. Katelyn explained her strategy for navigating her new campus and town in the following way:

> It was really almost disorienting at first, just because the campus itself here is probably bigger than my entire hometown. So for the first couple of days, I would just walk around campus to kind of get a sense – it's funny because I would call my mom. The first thing I do usually when I get somewhere is find my cardinal directions because I'm really used to that back home. Just like, "Oh, you head north, blah blah blah." So I would text my mom and be like, "Okay, I'm going north today." "Okay, I just need to go south to get back to my dorm." So it was really disorienting because there were so many buildings that to me they all looked alike and thank goodness that there was that map on your phone where you could find yourself because I'm like, "ok, I have to walk over here now." Once I wandered the campus and kind of found my way around, that's when I was like, "Okay, maybe I can start going out further into Austin." But it was rough at first because I hadn't ever lived anywhere this big.

This quote reveals that even with practical navigational skills and strategies, Katelyn still felt lost among the tall buildings that all looked the same to her. Most of the students used strategies similar to Katelyn, such as using physical maps or maps on their phones, exploring a little bit at a time, and asking for help when necessary. Ultimately became more comfortable with the campus and, as Alex shared, it began to feel smaller.

As students became more comfortable with campus they would begin to venture into the surrounding city of Austin. This also led to new navigational challenges as they encountered traffic and public transportation for the first time. Emma discussed that even after two years, she is still not used to accustom to driving in traffic. She recalled:

> One time I stopped and I got stuck in an intersection, and I legitimately was crying behind my steering wheel because I was in people's way, and everyone was honking … They honk and it's scary and I felt so bad. And so I'm still not used to that system, like city wise.

The students did not have to deal with traffic in their hometowns, so even though they had been driving for years, they had not developed the specific skills that would have helped them navigate traffic in the city. Christina explained:

> I was not used to traffic. And [the major interstate highway] is the scariest thing that I have dealt with just because there's no traffic back home and so it was overwhelming in the morning on my way to school. That was definitely a challenge.

But she also shared that the bus system was really helpful:

> Public transportation saved the day today. I've had a driver's license since I was 16 because you can't really get anywhere in my town by walking, and it's not like you can take the next nonexistent bus. I've become pretty familiar with Austin's transit. It also helps that my tuition covers rides.

Multiple students mentioned that the bus system was helpful for them to get around the city, but that it was also something they had to get used to. Tracie was the only student share that her hometown had a bus, but she explained that it was seldom used. The challenges and strategies students used in navigating the campus were in some ways a physical metaphor for the students' experiences navigating the institutional structures and culture of the campus.

Institutional structures and culture

In addition to the UT campus being physically large and challenging to navigate, it was also difficult for rural students to navigate the new institutional structures and culture they faced. Christina highlighted how it was more than the physical size that was larger than her hometown but also the population by exclaiming:

> And like how big the classes were was insane to me. And the campus was huge, like the campus itself is basically bigger than the – or the size of UT and the number of students is bigger than my entire town.

The large classes were a difficult transition for Christina not just because of the size but also "not having the one on one teacher time." This was a significant challenge for Sadie as well. She explained, "There are classes that are like 100 people and it feels impossible to talk to the professor, to approach them at all." Sadie focused on getting into smaller classes as she progressed through her major. She admitted that she "still [hasn't] figured out the whole thing with approaching professors," but she has gotten better at reaching out to others in her classes.

It is important to note that urban and suburban students are also not likely accustomed to classrooms with hundreds of other students and may find similar strategies helpful for being successful in this new environment. However, a potential distinction between these two experiences may go back to the earlier statements about rural students' lives overlapping with others in their hometowns. Rural students are accustomed to having relationships with those in their classes, including their teachers, beyond the classroom. Once again, needing to forge new relationships, or seek help from people

they do not have previous relationships with, may be a new skill that rural students are developing for the first time as they navigate the academic spaces of their new campus.

Sophia, on the other hand, did start going to her professors' office hours. She appreciated the opportunity to get "to know your professor one on one because it does help, actually a lot." Christina also worked up to going to her professors' office hours, but admitted it took her some time to build up to that. Learning how to find and utilize resources was important for students as they made their social and academic transition to UT, though as was the case with other themes that have emerged, this looked different for each student.

The students utilized a variety of resources in addition to those who reached out directly to their professors and teaching assistants. Students found help through comprehensive support programs, the University Writing Center and tutoring resources, and the university's counseling center. Each of these resources helped the students better navigate the institution.

Tracie and Sophia were part of a summer program that allowed them to begin taking classes over the summer after their high school graduation and helped them connect to new resources and begin the process of making new friends. Sophia shared that it helped her "set a very good group of friends" and that she "got to understand, 'Oh, this is what a college surrounding is like. These are the level of classes that you're going to be taking.'" She laughed and said, "No, but honestly that program – I'm not trying to just be clichéd, but no, that actually did – it did help out quite a lot." While this is one student and one program, it shows how helpful it can be for students to find

comprehensive support in a single resource. Christina also participated in a comprehensive support program that offered mentoring and small group opportunities, in addition to academic support.

The most common resource mentioned by the participants was the university's counseling center. It is also important to note that of the of the five students who spoke about using resources at the counseling center, three of them specifically mentioned that they felt it was taboo to discuss mental health within their hometown. JoAna explained, "I needed to go to a therapist. I wasn't able to until I got [to UT]. My dad told me not to tell anyone I'm taking this medicine." For her, counseling was not just a resource she sought to manage her transition to college, but a resource she felt she needed in her hometown that she finally had access to. Furthermore, her father's comments reveals that needing to take medication to support your mental health is something to hide from others within the community. With the concerns about gossip that can be prominent in small towns, news of an issue such as this could spread quickly.

For Veronica, counseling helped her understand she was not alone in the challenges she was facing. She shared:

> I had to go to counseling for a lot of reasons, and I learned that it's ok to go to counseling, and you're not crazy, and that shit just happens and you have to deal with that on your own. You're not alone.

It was helpful for Veronica to know that there were other students facing similar challenges and seeking help to overcome them. For Nick, having someone to talk to about everything going on in his life and his adjustment to UT was really helpful aspect of going to the counseling center. In addition to issues students may have hoped to seek

counseling for prior to their arrival at college, the new challenges they faced on campus, such as being away from family and trying to make new friends, were also issues that the counseling center helped them navigate.

Because of the "Top 10% rule"[16] in Texas, as well as the competitive nature of the application process for the remaining spots available to students seeking to enter UT, many of these students likely graduated in the top of their class. Also, the majority of the students were actively planning to apply to a four years institution. These factors are important to note because it highlights that these students may already be more likely to use the resources necessary to achieve their goals. This may speak to why the students were willing to access resources on campus. It is also a reminder that scholars should be cautious about generalizing this finding too broadly without additional research on rural students at other institutional types.

Summarizing Students' Transitions

The students' transitions into higher education often began with their aspirations to careers that they felt would be fulfilling, but could not be pursued if the students remained in their hometown. They also received motivation and support from a variety of familial sources. Once students made the choice to enter higher education support from their family and resources such as AP and dual credit courses as well as college

[16] In 1997 "a provision that allowed for all Texas high school students who finished in the top 10 percent of their graduating class to be guaranteed admission at any public university in the state" (Top 10 Percent Rule, n.d., para. 1). This rule left UT with little opportunity to exercise discretion in who they were able to admit to the university since the top 10% graduates made up such a large portion of each incoming class. Therefore, in 2011 a change was allowed the university "to cap the number of students admitted under the rule at 75 percent of the incoming class" (Top 10 Percent Rule, n.d., para. 6). The change now limits those receiving automatic admission to approximately the top eight percent.

preparation programs helped them begin their transition. Still, the students perceived a number of barriers that they would still need to overcome once they arrived on the UT campus. Students faced challenges navigating the physical, social and academic spaces of their new campus, but found that by breaking it into smaller pieces and utilizing the resources available to them they could overcome these challenges and be successful in their new community.

NEGOTIATING TENSIONS

The second research question I sought to answer through this study, "How do undergraduate students from rural communities negotiate tensions they experience within their rural community and within their college campus?" was based on an assumption that students would experience internal and external conflicts as they navigated the transitions between their hometown and the UT campus. In some ways the findings that arose from analysis of the data undermined this premise. This section will further explore the cultural conflicts that students acknowledged between their hometown and UT as well as the city of Austin but it will also examine the ways in which these conflicts did or did not cause internal tensions for the students.

Cultural Conflicts

Two main themes concerning the cultural differences between the students' rural communities and the UT campus became evident through the data analysis. The first difference that arose was the students' perception of their hometowns' cultures as conservative versus the culture of both the UT campus and Austin, which they perceived

to be more liberal. The second major difference that students encountered was the diversity of the campus as compared to the more homogenous populations of their hometowns.

Conservative versus liberal

As previously mentioned, each student described their hometown as conservative, which was not surprising based on extant literature; however, the students were able to offer a clearer understanding of what conservatism meant to them based on how they grew up. They were also able to explain what the driving forces of that conservatism were. It is important to understand that not only did each student describe UT as liberal after spending time on campus but that they also knew it had a reputation for being liberal prior to their arrival. For example, Alex talked about a man who attended his church in his hometown who makes snide comments about how liberal Austin is every time he visits home. One reason it is important to acknowledge the students' assumptions about UT's liberal leanings prior to arriving on campus is to highlight how these assumptions might impact the students' interpretations the campus culture. It also serves as an important reminder that students had this perception as they made the active choice to pursue a degree at UT. Jack admitted that he had "heard people say Austin is very liberal as a city. So it definitely attracted [him] because it was very outgoing, liberal." Students framed some of their understanding of UT as liberal in contrast to their conceptions of what they believed made their rural communities conservative, meaning that UT was considered to be liberal based on an acceptance marriage equality and broader support for the lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans*, and queer (LGBTQ) community. However, they also

connected their idea of UT as a liberal space to what they perceived as an open mindedness and people being more outspoken about their opinions than students' were accustomed to in their hometowns.

The students' characterizations of their hometown as conservative or UT as liberal were not primarily political characterizations, but social ones. Students felt that the primary facets of conservatism in their hometowns concerned issues of sexuality and gender norms and that these norms were primarily motivated by the churches in the community. As a result, JoAna had one of the starkest examples of the contrast between these rural communities and Austin. In explaining her hometown's perception of Austin, she claimed that community members told her, "people might brainwash you. And it's like, 'the gays,' 'the liberals.'" However, she was still shocked and pleased when she had the following experience while going to church in Austin with a friend:

> I went to a Baptist church with a friend and [the church was] like, "Oh, we're the first church that accepted the gays." I was like, "Oh wow. You guys even have a gay flag." I even saw two girls. They were just cuddling on the pew. At a church in my town, that wouldn't have happened. You'd sit next to each other maybe when no one's looking, but yeah, that wouldn't have happened. So it was nice. It was different seeing that. And I was like, "Wow, that's really great."

Once again, knowing the context that JoAna was coming from, it is easier to understand how shocking it could be for her to see one of the strongest examples of support for the LGBTQ community to be coming from a church. This quote also highlights that JoAna was excited to see not only that the church claimed to be accepting but also that LGBTQ couples actually felt comfortable there.

For Tracie, the conflict between what she considered to be the conservative values of her hometown and the more liberal values of UT was highlighted by the support she saw for Planned Parenthood and her exposure to feminism. Tracie shared that teen pregnancies were an issue in her hometown and yet the one women's clinic in the community was recently shut down. At the same time, she saw that in Austin the clinics were able to remain open because of outside donors. She was also struck by the prevalence of feminism on campus, explaining:

> This being a really liberal city and stuff, like coming here, – just the idea of feminism kind of struck me. Because there's a lot of people who are obviously for it, there's orgs for it, and different programs to push for it.

This is an important statement because it shows how Tracie associated issues of gender, particularly feminist ideologies, with the community being liberal, in the same way that Alex specifically linked normative ideas about female roles to conservatism.

In addition to these examples of liberalism on campus and in Austin that were in direct contrast with the ways students' described what it meant to be conservative, students also associated the idea of being liberal with the community seeming more accepting of differences and in turn people feeling more comfortable with, and being more expressive about, who they are. Katelyn discussed that "it was really neat to see people that were super comfortable with themselves, and stuff like that, just from the get go and express it here." Christina additionally explained that people felt "free to express their views, and they didn't feel tied down to this idea of how I have to be." While the general acceptance of a diversity of people was part of students' ideas about what it

meant for the university to be liberal, the diversity itself was also a strong cultural difference that the student's acknowledged throughout their interviews.

Diversity versus homogeneity

The diversity of the UT campus was one of the strongest themes to emerge through the data analysis for this study. Jack expressed it this way:

> There's so much diversity at UT in general because I'm so used to the homogenous population in [my hometown]. And when I come to UT there's just so many different types of people from different backgrounds and sometimes it's overwhelming to see. It's sort of mind-blowing. There's just all these different people.

The students mentioned multiple forms of diversity on the campus; however, the racial and ethnic diversity was most prominent in their conversations. As mentioned in chapter 4 the UT student body is 45.1% White, 19.5% Latinx, 17.2% Asian American, 3.9% Black and .2% Native American (Facts & Figures, 2016). This racial and ethnic diversity was acknowledged by each of the students; however, it was perceived and discussed differently based on the racial and ethnic demographics of their hometown. Those students who came from predominantly White rural communities spoke about the diversity fairly generally and those from predominantly Latinx communities spoke about how many White people were on campus. Students who came from more heterogeneous communities, with either close to a 50% split between the Latinx and White populations in their town or a 30% split across the Black, Latinx, and White populations, spoke in more nuanced ways about the diversity of the campus.

One example of the general ways that students from the predominantly White communities spoke about diversity came from Emma who claimed:

> I think the UT campus is very diverse and I really enjoy it. When I do visit other campuses, you can tell – not that there's anything wrong with them, but you can always tell there's a certain vibe about that particular campus, and I think UT's vibe, or atmosphere, is that they are very accepting of a lot of different people, a lot of different cultures.

At the same time Veronica, who comes from a predominantly Latinx community, discussed the initial shock of how many White people were on campus. When asked how she thought about campus she shared:

> I guess honestly when I think of UT now, now that I've been here, I think of White. I think of White students, White faculty. However, when I started seeing more of my community here at UT, I see more Latinos.

Jack noticed there were a lot more Asian American people than he had ever been exposed to before, saying:

> Since I got onto campus I've been noticing more Asian Americans and it is just – back in my hometown I did not see the diversity that there is here. So I was really used to seeing Mexicans and Caucasian people, White people. And now that I am here on campus there are so many different types of people and it's really interesting.

Tracie who came from one of the most racially and ethnically diverse communities in the study spoke about differences among those who identified as Black or Latinx. She explained:

> I never realized that I had friends who were African in school because they didn't – they either knew they were African but didn't see themselves as African, or they knew they were African and they just – they were perceived as Black anyway, or African American, so it just seemed like whatever. When I came here, and I'm thinking everyone's Black, because I had no one that was African as friends or at least that announced it… And I didn't want to offend anyone but I was like "What's the difference between you and me? We're both Black." But they're like "No, no, no. My family is from Nigeria and I grew up in a culture and we just have a different culture than African Americans." And I was just blown away.

Each of these quotes exhibits the different ways that participants encountered and interpreted the diversity on the UT campus; however, these quotes still primarily focus on their understanding of the racial and ethnic diversity that students encountered. Students also highlighted other forms of diversity present on campus.

When asked about how UT and Austin were different from her hometown, Veronica responded, "The differences are that there are different religions. People identify as different genders. People identify as different sexual orientations. Like there's just way more diversity here in Austin or at UT than there would be at my hometown." She acknowledged that the diversity of the community goes beyond race or ethnicity.

Sadie also brought up religion when talking about the differences between her hometown and UT, explaining, "Not everybody is Christian and not everybody is White or Hispanic. There were a lot of Hispanics in my hometown. So just it's much more racially diverse, religiously diverse…" Sadie shared more specifically that she had encountered a lot of atheists on campus, and that "a lot of the professors are also atheists and they kind of talk about that a lot in class sometimes depending on the class, and whether or not it's relevant." For Sadie, the general prevalence that she perceived of students who identified as secular or atheist on campus did not bother her; however, when she encountered it from her professors and she disagreed with the professors' viewpoints she felt more uncomfortable.

Nick also highlighted his excitement to finally be around more people who identified as gay. He shared:

> It feels much more open and liberal on things. I met a lot more gay people, which is cool to see. I'm very ecstatic when I see gay people there, gay people there, gay people everywhere. I mean, UT hires them and stuff, and there's tons of them – it's just not a bit deal. But back home, every time I saw another gay person I was like "Oh, my fellow homosexual." I don't know another one.

After being anxious to come out in his hometown, it is not surprising that Nick was excited to be in a place where he could be open and accepted. Also, similar to JoAna, he felt like there was real evidence that the campus was accepting of LGBTQ people.

THE IMPACT OF CONFLICTING CULTURES

While these differences between UT and the students' hometowns were expected to cause internal conflicts for the students, tensions did not necessarily arise for participants based on these issues. Many of the students recognized that a conflict between the two cultures existed; however, because they identified more closely with UT's values than those espoused in their rural community, the internal tensions did not arise. Once again, this is why it is important to note that many of the students made a conscious choice to attend UT knowing that it had a reputation for being liberal. In the following section I will discuss the impact that moving to the campus had on students in the absence of these expected internal conflicts.

Constructing Consciousness

The previous section describes how, even though the cultures of the students' rural communities and UT might have been in conflict, the students did not necessarily feel an internal tension as a result of those cultural conflicts. In many cases the students had not been completely comfortable or agreed with the conservative values espoused by

their home communities. As a result, this was often a factor for the students as they chose to attend UT, which was perceived to be one of the more liberal colleges in the state. Therefore, it seems that the students did not experience any internal tensions between the two cultures because they were not committed to the specific cultural values of their community that were in conflict with UT's cultural values. So, rather than causing a tension, the students' time at UT was allowing them to further develop the more liberal views they already held and to explore new ideas that might align with their more liberal leanings. While previous literature has discussed the liberalizing effects of colleges and universities (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005), it is important to note the agency of students in this process.

Christina was clear that her personal views had not changed since she moved away from her hometown, but they had developed.

> Coming here, I had the same views back home. I just grew up a little bit and felt more confident. UT kind of, I don't want to say like encouraged, but enhanced that.

She also shared:

> I think it was something internal when I was back home, but then once I came here and actually started listening and hearing what other people had to say about it, then it became stronger. I can see both points of view from like Democratic and Republican, conservative versus liberal, but I think I've always aligned more with liberal points of view and so I think it just got stronger as I lived here and was at UT.

These quotes are important because they are explicit about Christina's views prior to matriculating onto the UT campus and explain that they were not created on her new campus, but developed there. This was a common theme across the students. This theme

did not solely manifest in students who felt more comfortable with their liberal values on campus. Veronica felt more comfortable exploring her identity as a Mexican American woman. She explained, "I'm more in touch with who I am given my roots. I'm talking about my identity, just being comfortable with being Mexican American in this country is also something scary right now." Even though she came from a predominantly Latinx community, and perceived UT to be predominantly White, Veronica found this a space to become more aware of and to grow in her Mexican American identity.

Sophia shared that she started "hanging out with people that are like a little bit more like-minded like [me]. Just kind of had like the same values." Katelyn also shared about joining groups that aligned with her values saying, "I've tried to, I don't know, been more comfortable joining groups of people that I think we have similar ideas, and stuff like that." While the students intentionally sought out a more liberal space where they might develop their own liberal ideologies, they did not just passively accept these new ideas. Nick used the internet to better understand social movements he was exposed to through his friends on campus, such as Black Lives Matter and work fighting for undocumented students. When asked how he researched these issues he explained, "Honestly, it is a lot of Google, but I do make sure my sites are accurate. And I will go directly to sources sometimes – like statistics from the FBI or something – or I will read a lot of articles." Students learned to research on their own and think in more critical ways about the new ideas they were exposed to.

Though many of the students chose UT in part because of its liberal leanings, the students were still exposed to new concepts or ideas on campus, which they then needed

to critically examine. The students primarily turned to the Internet or the personal experiences of those they met to research these new ideas. Tracie offered examples of how she used both strategies as she explained her personal journey to identifying as a feminist. She claimed:

> That's when I was kind of like, "Okay, wait. Let me just take away the notion of what I thought before and actually look at [feminism]," and I had to actually go and look and be like "Oh, this makes so much sense." And there's faults on both sides, of course, but for the most part, I was like "you guys don't understand, feminists had to go and create this movement for y'all to hear them because if they didn't strike a nerve, with the word feminism, which is perfect, y'all wouldn't hear them to begin with, you know?" …And it was weird. Once I started agreeing, I was confused, I was taken aback and I was like "okay, let me listen to that one more time" and then when I was like okay, yeah… It like helped open my eyes.

Feminist was a difficult identity for Tracie to take on. As she first encountered it on campus she associated it with negative connotations she had attached to it growing up in her more rural community. As she took the time to listen to the women in the feminist group she attended, she learned from their personal stories and realized that she agreed with the tenets of their organization and her false assumptions about the aims of feminism dissipated. She explained her final acceptance of this new identity in the following way:

> So, I was like, "Okay, let me just read about it and take those online quizzes and learn some more stuff." And then eventually it was an identity I was willing to accept, or not accept but realize that I always was. I was like, "Oh, okay. So I am a feminist."

Once again, even as Tracie conveys the deliberate and critical process she went through as she considered whether or not to take on the identity of a feminist, she ultimately described it not as becoming something new, but naming something she had always been.

Social Negotiations

While students did not necessarily feel an internal tension as a result of these cultural conflicts, they did have to negotiate new social dynamics as they came into their own at UT. As students became more confident in their opinions and committed to their values, their relationships with those who remained in the rural community shifted. It is important to note that students seemed to experience less of a shift in their relationships with family members and with other friends who left the community to pursue higher education. Tracie explained that while she felt a growing distance between her and her friends who remained in the hometown, she felt that her other friends who had left to go to college were changing in similar ways to her. She shared:

> The friends that I actually did keep, who are still close, they also went through almost the same change that I did and it's almost as if we both – we came from [the same hometown], so simple minded, and then something just clicked and so when we talk now, we're always just like, "Oh my god, can you believe how we acted in high school?" It was like we both turned on the same switches, when for other people it hasn't turned on, or another switch has been on the whole time and mine's just been off since I came here. And so my conversations are different with them and spending time with them has changed. So I don't really allow enough time with them because I didn't realize - not that we wouldn't be friends, but I don't think that we benefit each other in the same sense, you know?

Tracie could sense that the distance between her and her friends who remained in their rural community was not only physical. There was also an increasing social distance between them.

The students built facades to mask their shifting values when they returned home and used other strategies of avoidance to negotiate the changes they experienced in relationships with people from their hometowns. Still, the confidence that students gained while on campus lead them to be more bold about voicing their opinions when it

was necessary. Students had not just adopted new values, but they had done the research to back up the positions they were taking and while none of them sought our conflict when they were at home, they were prepared to stand their ground in the instances when it did arise.

AVOIDANCE AND MASKING

The primary strategy that students used when managing the cultural conflict between what they understood to be their increasingly liberal values and the more conservative values of their hometowns was avoidance. Alex talked about avoiding controversial topics as something that had always been done in his hometown, stating:

> Everyone in my town is super conservative, so it's like you never really discuss the other side's pros or the conservative cons… Like I said, just very controversial things, because especially in a small town everyone tries to not be as controversial because it's so small everyone knows about it, right?

Katelyn similarly explained that it was easier to not bring up topics when you knew that your views were outside of the community's norms, sharing, "I knew that my views were obviously different, So I didn't really express them as much back home because it's like, 'Oh, well, there's no point in stirring this up and whatnot.'" Sadie had come to a point where she wanted to avoid her hometown almost completely, explaining:

> The closest friends that I had in high school are still my closest friends now. But like my acquaintances, I feel I just can't be around. So it just makes me not want to be at home anymore because it's hard to deal with people.

Sadie had ignored or avoided these issues while she still lived in the community; however, now that she was away at UT she did not want to return to her hometown at all.

Nick even avoided political posts on social media because he was connected to so many people from back home and he did not want to face the potential lack of support from his community. He shared:

> I think one of the big challenges is social media because everyone from my hometown follows me on social media. So I've just got this policy where I don't post political stuff. But I'm a very politically oriented person… I went to the Women's March[17] last Saturday, and I – this is the first time I've posting anything political in about two or three years. Although my views had started changing once I went to junior college. I've kind of gone back and forth, Libertarian, conservative, liberal – all this stuff. But I started changing more towards liberal when I was in community college, but I just stopped posting any of that stuff, or any comments or anything. But it's always – you know, you want to get involved in [something like the Women's March], and you want to be in the picture with everybody, but you kind of don't want people back home to know, because there's some weird paranoia I have that I wouldn't get much support.

Though Nick's concerns about the reactions from people in his hometown still lingered, his desire to be more public about his political commitments and activities was beginning to win out.

Another way that students would avoid engaging in what could have been cultural conflicts when they returned home was by masking their developing values and pretending that they were not changing as a result of their time at UT. The students would revert to how they were in high school when they returned to their hometown. This language of "reverting back to how you were" was how Katelyn explained going home. She shared:

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[17] The Women's March on Washington took place on Saturday, January 21, 2017. It was "a grassroots effort comprised of dozens of independent coordinators at the state level" (Event Details, 2017, para. 1). There were also 673 sister marches which were solidarity events that occurred around the world, including one in Austin (Sister Marches, 2017).

> When I went back home, it struck me, that sense I had been there forever, since I was a kid. It's really hard to escape that –not escape but to get rid of our child things, how you were in high school. Everyone always reverts back to that.

It was comfortable and easy to continue to be the person that everyone expected you to be.

Sophia discussed changing "mindsets" depending on whether she was on campus or in her hometown. She explained:

> Every single time I go back it's almost like a small culture shock, just because I have to adjust myself a little bit and I guess like – like I have to remind myself that "not all of these people think the same way that you do," so it is a little - not uncomfortable, but you have to be very flexible going from [my hometown] to Austin and Austin to [my hometown]. It's different mindsets. One time I forgot and I was like – I was still in Austin mode or something, because I was saying all these things and a couple of friends were like, "What happened?", So it is a little hard, socially adjusting or switching back and forth, but I don't go home often so I don't I have to do that a lot.

This was one of the clearest explanations from any of the students of how they shifted their own behaviors, or what they discussed, as they moved between the two spaces.

JoAna offered another clear example. For her, masking her changing identity meant acting "straighter" when she was in her hometown. She shared:

> I have to make sure that I'm straighter in town, like I have to make sure I don't say anything that comes out weird. For example, I told my roommate like, "oh there was this girl and she was pretty nice." But then at home I can't be open about it. I have to be like guarded.

For JoAna, it was not just that she "changed her mindset", or had to avoid talking about a new idea or conflicting value, but about feeling like she needed to hide a part of her identity.

Nick was the only student to talk specifically about his accent; however, for him this was also where he most clearly described how he masked a particular way he was changing. He explained:

> That's how I really sound. It's when you go back, you want to – you feel like when you're talking to people around there, you have to put your accent back on. That's what I feel like. I have to put my accent – it's like getting my accent out of a box and – it's like a hat. I feel like I have to put that on when I go back to [my hometown] or surrounding community and I'm talking to people.

Just like Sophia and JoAna, he could feel the conscious changes he was making to the way he spoke as he moved between each space so that he would fit in better within each one.

Facing the conflict

While many of the students felt it was easier to avoid the potential social challenges of their conflicting cultures, some also gained a new confidence while at school and were more willing to speak up on issues that they really cared about. For example, as previously mentioned, Sophia felt the need to be flexible as she moved back and forth between her hometown and UT; however, when she felt attacked by someone from her town on Facebook because of her opposition to the "bathroom bill"[18] she was less afraid to defend her position and share the research that she had done to inform that position.

Christina also felt more confident and willing to share her opinions with others. She explained:

[18] SB 6 is a bill proposed in the Texas Senate that would regulate who could use certain public restrooms and changing facilities, which would require a person to use the restroom that aligned with the biological sex listed on the person's birth certificate rather than the gender that the person identifies with (S.B. 6, 2017).

> I think whenever I go back home I'm not as shy about it. I know that people are like, "Ugh, she went to Austin and got weird." …I go back home and I know that a lot of people believe a lot of things that I don't necessarily agree with. And so I don't feel like, "Okay I'm in [my hometown] and I have to believe the norm," because there's not another group of people that agree with me. So I don't feel like I have to fall back into that. I'm a little bit better at arguing those points of view or just like being myself.

So, Christina was not going to seek out conflict within her hometown but she also was not going to hide who she was, or who she was becoming, when she returned home.

Summarizing Students' Social Negotiations

Despite the cultural conflicts that students recognized between UT and their hometowns, they did not experience the internal tensions that were anticipated based on the extant literature. Students seemed to have avoided these internal conflicts because they had not fully adopted the values of their hometown and felt more closely aligned with the values they were able to explore on the UT campus. They did, however, believe that they would experience external conflicts with members of their rural community when they returned home. Rather than engage with these external conflicts most students avoided controversial topics or would code switch when they returned home. Still, in the end students were confident about the values they were developing at UT and, when necessary, felt comfortable defending their position when conflicts arose around issues they cared deeply about.

CONTEXTUALIZING, NAVIGATING, AND NEGOTIATING

In order to truly understand the experiences of rural students as they transition between their hometowns and a college campus, it is vital to first understand how these

students make meaning of their own rurality. Giving students the agency to define for themselves what it meant to be rural provided a richer contextualization for the findings that emerged from the data analysis. Ultimately, the students' definitions for what it meant to be rural and the common attributes across their communities had direct connections to the themes that emerged concerning each of the research questions.

For example, the isolation of the students' hometowns made it difficult for them to leverage the social capital they gained within the community on their campus; however, the close-knit nature of the towns served as an example of the type of community students wanted to create for themselves at UT. The students' career aspirations, coupled with support and inspiration from their family members, served as a launching point for their decision to pursue higher education and continued to help sustain them as they transitioned onto campus. Once on campus students were able to navigate both the physical and institutional structures of the university by breaking it down into smaller pieces, learning to ask for help, and utilizing the resources available to them.

The creating of a new consciousness was another aspect of the students' experiences transitioning between their hometown and UT. The students who participated in this study made an active choice to attend a university that was known to be more liberal than the rural communities they grew up in. Their time on campus offered them exposure to new ideas and opportunities to research more liberal values than those espoused in their hometowns. While these increasingly liberal perspectives did not create internal tensions for the students to manage, they did create shifts in the students'

relationships with members of their rural community. Students' initial response to these potential conflicts was to avoid them either directly or by employing a façade to mask their shifting worldviews.

In the end, even though the students expressed that they felt a dissonance with the values of their hometown, most continued to speak of the community with a certain fondness. None of the students intended to move back to their hometowns after graduation; however, many of them still enjoyed visiting it and some talked about moving back after they retired. I believe it is this continued fondness for a place that they grew up in, supported them, and that they were so tightly knit into the fabric of, that can ultimately lead to an internal conflict for some of the students. While they feel a dissonance with the values of the community, they also have an understanding of why people continue to hold those values. Through the analysis of the data, I was only able to see the beginnings of this process for the students; however, I will explore this potential trajectory of the students in greater detail in the final chapter.

CHAPTER SIX: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Creating a better understanding of the experiences of students transitioning into higher education from rural communities is an important step in ensuring that administrators and faculty members are able to effectively support these students as they arrive on college and university campuses. As postsecondary institutions increase their recruitment efforts in rural spaces, they have an ethical obligation to make sure that they are meeting the needs of these rural students. At the same time, colleges and universities have the incredible potential to create mutually beneficial relationships with rural communities and their students. This work will also hopefully encourage faculty and staff members to acknowledge the rich diversity that exists within this student population and engage these students in ways that will enrich the entire campus.

With this in mind, in this final chapter I begin by discussing how the themes that emerged through data analysis relate to extant literature concerning rural students and the conceptual framework established in chapter two. I will then propose and updated theoretical framework for understanding and researching rural students' transitions between their hometown and college or university. Next, I will explore the implications of the findings from this study for institutions of higher education as well as rural communities and other policy makers. Once I have presented the implications of this work, I will discuss next steps and directions for future research. Finally, I will conclude this chapter, and the study as a whole, with my own personal reflections on this work and its impact on my understanding of not only the broader experiences of rural students at The University of Texas at Austin but also my own journey as rural student who

continues to negotiate the tensions of leaving my community to matriculate into higher education even 15 years later.

Summary of Key Findings

Each student that participated in this study was unique in personality, the ways they identified, the careers they were pursuing, and the rural communities they were coming from. Yet, they still had similar ideas about what it meant to be rural as well as common experiences as they transitioned to UT and strategies to cope with those challenges as they moved between the campus and their hometowns. The characteristics that students offered as central to rurality were not necessarily different from those already used to define rural spaces; however, the students were also able to define the traits for themselves and share how these attributes impacted their experiences growing up. Through this process the students were able to cast these characteristics in a new light and, in doing so, reclaim some of the negative connotations that can be attributed to their communities.

For many of the students their rural background impacted the experiences they had in transitioning to college in a number of ways, from the choices they made about entering higher education and their future careers to how they interpreted the diversity on campus. At the same time, their rural upbringing also offered an example of the type of close-knit and supportive community they wanted to recreate once they arrived on campus. While all of the students faced challenges on campus, they were able to develop the skills necessary to overcome these obstacles and grow as a person in the process. The students acknowledged that they were becoming more themselves as a result of their time

at UT. They also shared that these changes impacted their relationships with people back home, particularly with friends who did not leave the community to pursue higher education. In this section I will discuss how the key findings from this study are connected to the literature presented in chapter two as well as the relevant aspects of the conceptual framework established for the study.

Key Finding #1: Defining Rural

The central themes that emerged concerning students' understanding of rurality were size and space. Students understood the small size of their communities to be one of the primary characteristics of rurality. While there are a wide variety of definitions of what it means to be rural, one of the most common characteristics correlated with rurality is small size (Atkin, 2003; Guenther and Weible, 1983). Though the participants acknowledge that the size of their community sometimes meant that there were limited resources within the town, the small size was also what contributed to the close-knit nature of the community. The small population size made it easier to know everyone else in the community. Also, "only having one of things" lead to people encountering one another in multiple aspects of their lives giving them not just repeated opportunities to establish relationships with others in their community but making the establishment of those relationships almost unavoidable.

Isolation or distance from urban areas is also often included as a characteristic of rurality (Atkin, 2003; NCES n.d.). Students discussed the isolation of their communities from other communities and resources as a characteristic of its rurality; however, it was not always framed as a negative trait. It was this isolation that allowed the quiet

environment that many of the students enjoyed when they returned home or the opportunity to see the stars as they left bright lights of the city behind. Also, while the size of the community created a tightly knit social fabric, the low population density allowed people a physical space that the students appreciated, especially in contrast with the crowded spaces and traffic of Austin. Though students appreciated the easily accessible resources of living in the city, they also valued the personal space and opportunities to enjoy nature that their rural communities provided.

The students voiced frustrations about the small size and isolation of their communities but they also saw the benefits. The size of the community lead to a limited amount of social space that, at times, fostered gossip; however, it also created close bonds and a supportive environment particularly for families who were in need and for the students' activities within the community. While there was little social space between people within the community, there was greater physical space, which the students appreciated. Though the limited resources within the community at times served as an obstacle for students, they valued the space they had to themselves, the darkness that emphasized the stars, and the quiet to hear themselves think. I believe that it is particularly important to understand that these positive characterizations are coming from students who actively chose to leave the community and who do not plan to return, at least in the near future. I call attention to this fact because it could be easy to assume that these students are the most likely to disparage their community; therefore, I believe this gives even more weight to the positive framing that they provided.

Key Finding #2: What it Means to be Conservative

Even though only a couple of the students included conservatism as part of their definition of rurality, all of the students discussed it as a trait of their hometown. However, it is important to understand that students were often speaking of the values held within the community on social issues that they viewed as conservative rather than political views. The students were seldom equating conservatism with being Republican or with political views concerning the size of the government. They primarily spoke specifically about the restrictive views of the community concerning sexuality and gender norms. The participants saw the churches within the community as the source of these values. Once again, this was the case for all students, even those who came from democratic leaning communities.

Furthermore, the students rarely equated conservatism with narrow-mindedness, at least explicitly; however, they did often associate liberalism with open-mindedness and an acceptance of diversity. I believe that the previous characteristics of size and space help to explain this phenomenon. As previously mentioned, the rural communities are often isolated both physically and socially from other towns or cities and typically very tight-knit as a result of people's lives overlapping in multiple ways. Coupled together it is easy to understand how the values of a rural community could become insulated from external influences, particularly as families live in the same community for generations.

Next, it is important to remember that the churches' influence went beyond Sunday mornings and Wednesday nights as well as beyond the church walls. Many students spoke about the influence of Christianity in their schools through their teachers,

prayer at school events, or Bible studies and other church-led programs that happened on school grounds. The churches not only provided a religious foundation for the community but often a social one as well. The isolation of that culture form outside forces and the close-knit nature of the community can be a helpful way to understand how there might be particularly strong norms within the community and acknowledging how embedded the churches were in the culture of the communities helps to explain how the moral imperatives of those churches were so strongly felt across the community, even for those students who did not consider themselves to be particularly religious.

It is also important to reiterate that each of these students made an intentional choice to attend UT knowing that it had a reputation for being one of the more liberal schools in Texas and that many discussed being excited about the liberal culture, a choice that put them in the minority within their communities. It is from this perspective that the students shared about their understanding of their hometowns as conservative. Also, while the students' were frustrated by the conservative values of their hometowns, they did not necessarily see these values as central to what it meant to be rural, only central to their specific community.

Key Finding #3: Capital for College

As the students navigated their transition into higher education a variety of forms of capital were helpful to them. Pulling from Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth model the two forms of capital most salient to the students from the beginning of the process were aspirational capital and familial capital. Once they arrived on campus, students also employed a form of capital similar to navigational capital in which they

called upon practical skills they gained within their rural community to overcome new challenges they faced on the UT campus.

It is important to remember that Yosso's (2005) model was originally created to speak to communities of color; however, in this study it was used as part of the conceptual framework to see if the various forms of capital included in the model were also applicable rural students, and if so, if the forms of capital were applicable to students coming from rural communities of color, predominantly White rural communities, and more heterogeneous communities. Once again, this process did not seek to equate race and rurality, but to employ theoretical concepts that could address the diversity of both the students and their communities as I sought to understand the phenomenon of the students transitioning between their hometown and campus. Understanding the forms of capital that were most helpful to students can help rural communities develop these forms of capital within the town as students grow up and help colleges and universities support students as they learn to leverage these forms of capital on campus.

Aspirational

For many students aspirational capital was the starting point for their journey into higher education and helped sustain the students as they progressed toward their degree. The students did not simply aspire to obtain a degree but they were also seeking out careers that they were passionate about; however, they felt that there were not opportunities to pursue those career choices within their hometowns. This echoes the findings of Demi and colleagues (2009), which revealed students perceptions of their

communities ability to support their career plans played a role in students leaving the community.

As proposed in chapter two, by having matriculated into college, the students were already exhibiting a form of aspirational capital by achieving something that they had likely seen few examples of. These students pressed forward even when they felt they had not had access to that same resources and preparation as their urban and suburban counterparts. Despite the perceived barriers these students faced, their aspirations propelled them to not only pursue higher education, but to attend what they understood to be one of the most prestigious colleges in the state. Though the literature clearly outlines economic opportunities as a draw for students to leave their community, evidence of additional aspirations emerged within this study. As previously mentioned, a majority of the students were seeking, what they understood to be, a more liberal environment. This highlights aspirations beyond pursuing a degree or career but also opportunities to explore ideologies they either did not feel they had access to or did not feel comfortable pursuing within their hometown.

Familial

Participants received support and inspiration from their families that both encouraged them to enter higher education and motivated them to persist once they matriculated. Within the community cultural wealth model, familial capital was more than just the support of immediate family members but the bonds that extend beyond biological family and keep people connected to their community (Yosso, 2005). The close-knit nature of their hometowns meant that most of the students continued to remain

connected to their community and could understand that value of these bonds.. Therefore, it is not surprising that each student placed an emphasis on the importance of creating a smaller community to be a part of on the UT campus.

For many students, when discussing what was similar between their hometown and UT there was very little that students could come up with; however, for those who did discuss a similarity it was often the sense of community they were able to create on campus. Through involvement in student organizations and work-study jobs the students were able to create smaller communities to be a part of. Leaving a space where their lives constantly overlapped with those around them, students had to put effort into connecting with others and learn to be intentional about spending with new friends because it would not just naturally happen as it did in their hometowns.

An important note about the communities that students were able to create on campus is that many of these communities helped the students further explore an aspect of their identity, such as their race, ethnicity, gender, or sexual orientation; however, none of these new communities further explored the students' rurality. Christina and Veronica each joined Latina founded sororities, Tracie joined groups that connected her to other Black students and feminists, and JoAna participated in an LGBTQ organization. While the students were excited to meet and create relationships people from a wide variety of backgrounds, they were also happy to explore parts of their own identity in new ways through the organizations they joined on campus. This was even true for Veronica who is Latina and grew up in a community that was over 98% Latinx, but was still able to explore her ethnicity in new ways through her time on campus. Being away from a place

where she was fully immersed in the Mexican culture of her hometown, highlighted its uniqueness. This supports the assertion from chapter two that different parts of a person's identity can be more or less salient, or understood in different ways, based on the place they are in. In the same way, perhaps creating new opportunities for rural students to connect with each other could allow them to explore the rural aspect of their identity within a new context and support each other through their transition.

Navigational

In addition to the support and strong bonds students learned to value within their hometowns, they also gained practical skills that helped them as they sought to navigate both the institutional and physical structures of their new campus. Students spoke of a self-reliance that they gained from living within a rural community and practical skills that they did not feel their peers from urban or suburban areas possessed. As with many of the other themes, this emerged in a few different ways. Some of the students discussed taking care of basic things concerning their car such as being able to change a flat tire or even simply checking the tire pressure. Some of the students knew how to build fires and then there was JoAna who talked about learning to castrate a goat. Students learned how to problem solve when they discovered there was something they needed at 9:30 at night and the only store in town was already closed or how to entertain themselves without movie theatres or concerts in their hometown. They also talked about the work ethic and responsibility they learned from watching the farmers and small business owners in their town and, for many of the students, contributing to that work themselves.

As previously mentioned, Yosso's (2005) navigational capital truly speaks to the capital necessary to navigate social spaces and institutional structures that were created without the person in mind. This self-reliance aided the students in their transition into higher education, and while the students did not often find a need to castrate livestock on the UT campus, they learned to use their work ethic and problem solving skills in new ways on campus to overcome the obstacles they faced. Interestingly, this self-reliance did not mean that the students were unwilling to seek out help when necessary or utilize the resources on campus.

Though the students acknowledged limitations to the resources in their hometowns, they did take advantage of what was available to them. This characteristic served them well as they came to UT and began to seek out resources that could help them in their new setting. Once again, almost all of these students were at the top of their graduating classes, which may have meant they were already more likely than their peers to take advantage of resources they felt would contribute to their success. Also, coming from small tight-knit communities, the students may also have a greater understanding of how a community can work together and support each other when in need. There are multiple reasons why these students may have been particularly prone to reach out and use the resources available to them on campus and further research should be done to see if this is a more generalizable trait and how to continue to encourage it in order to generate even greater success among the rural student population.

Recreating social capital

In addition to seeking resources on the campus, students also had to develop new skills. As previously mentioned students had to learn to develop friendships and community while on campus. They also had to learn to create social capital within their new community. While students discussed examples of social capital they possessed within their hometown, they were not necessarily able to leverage this capital on the university campus. Therefore students had to build new forms of social capital once they arrived at UT. Students also had to learn to transition skills from their hometown to their new urban environment. For example, students talked about driving everywhere in their hometown, but they had never had to deal with driving in traffic before. Students learning to leverage the skills they obtained in their hometowns in new ways and recreating some of the positive aspects of their hometown on their college campus played an important role in their success at UT.

Though Byun and colleagues (2012) revealed that social capital was a factor for students choosing to attend higher education, for the students in this study the social capital they achieved at home did not translate smoothly into higher education. Still, students' previous access to social capital may have helped them understand its value and encouraged them to seek to create it on the campus. So, while the actual social capital from their rural community was not able to be leveraged on campus, it likely offered and example to be replicated within their new environment.

Less dominant forms of capital

In the initial conceptual framework that I created for this study I only focused on four of Yosso's (2005) six forms of capital - aspirational, familial, navigational, and social. However, I used all six forms of capital within my etic coding process to ensure that I did not over look forms of linguistic or resistant capital that might be present. These two forms of capital were not completely absent across the participants; however, they were also not consistent enough to emerge as themes for the study. Linguistic capital emerged for Veronica who is bilingual and grew up in a hometown where English and Spanish were used almost interchangeably within the community. The other student who discussed forms of linguistic capital was Katelyn who was pursuing a foreign language as one of her two majors.

In addition JoAna, Tracie, and Nick were the only participants to discuss anything that resembled resistant capital. For JoAna and Tracie this resistance was toward their hometown. Nick's resistance manifested in the form of political advocacy with an organization on campus. Once again, because the community cultural wealth model speaks specifically to communities of color, it is important to that Veronica, JoAna, and Tracie are all women of color, with Veronica and JoAna coming from predominantly Latinx communities and Tracie coming from a community with the Black and Latinx populations comprising 52% of the total population. Also, Nick who is a White man began to build this capital through the community of color that he was intentionally engaged in, seeking to learn and support his peers and friends. I believe that these details help reinforce that these forms of capital within the model are indeed still applicable to

students of color coming from communities of color, even if those communities are rural. Furthermore, while some of the forms of capital seem to translate to a variety or rural communities regardless of demographic make-up, not all of the forms of capital in the community cultural wealth model are applicable across all rural communities.

Key Finding #4: Constructing Consciousness

Though students recognized cultural conflicts between their rural communities and the UT campus, they did not internalize these conflicts. For the students who participated in this study their time at UT allowed them to further develop values they held within their hometown, but did not feel they had the opportunity to fully explore until they arrived on campus. Scholars such as Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) discuss the liberalizing effects of college and members of the students' hometowns warned them about being brainwashed by the liberals in Austin; however, for these students, these liberal values were not imposed on them, they sought these values out.

Because the students did not fully embrace the values of their rural community that were in conflict with the values they encountered at UT, they did not experience a changing of consciousness as presented by Anzaldúa (1987). Rather, the students seemed to experience an awakening, or becoming conscious, as a result of their time at UT. I use this terminology because the students talk about their shift in consciousness as becoming more themselves. In Anzaldúa's (1987) work she discusses a process of deconstructing and reconstructing that *la mestiza* goes through. For these students, they did not have to dismantle a previously developed worldview in order to reconstruct a new one; they were truly constructing their worldview for the first time.

One part of this construction process was research. Even though the students overall felt that their values aligned more closely with those they encountered on campus, they did not just passively accept these new views. The students used research available to them through their courses, online research, and the personal experiences of those they met, to evaluate the new ideas and decide which ones to incorporate into their own worldview. The students did not simply look to their new campus for validation of the values they had come to UT to explore, but would critically examine these new ideas until they felt comfortable adopting them as part of their own values or decided to reject them.

Key Finding #5: Avoidance and Ambiguity

Though students did not experience an internal conflict as they began to embrace or develop new ideas and values on campus, they did begin to experience, or at least believe they would experience, external conflicts with those who remained in their hometown. The most common strategy students used to negotiate these external tensions, whether perceived or real, was avoidance. Students used avoidance tactics in multiple ways including avoiding controversial topics while at home, avoiding going home, and "reverting to their old selves," rather than expressing their new values and having to deal with the conflict directly. It is important to note that most of the students had not adopted these avoidance strategies because they had experienced an actual conflict with people from their hometown as a result of their changing values, but in anticipation of those conflicts arising.

Some of the students found themselves going home less often; however, Sadie was the only participant who spoke clearly about not wanting to return. The students were still connected to the communities through their families and friends even if these relationships were changing. I believe that the strategies to avoid controversial topics or to create a façade that would mask the ways the students were changing, were attempts to protect relationships that were changing but that students also still cared about. Had students not valued these relationships with the community, they would likely have avoided the community all together or not cared about how their newly embraced values would impact the relationships. However, I propose, that when the students do not allow their friends and family to engage with who they are truly becoming and only allow them to interact with a façade of who they once were, this act itself creates a social distance between themselves and those who have remained in their hometown. So, the students' attempts to keep these relationships in tact may at the same time be undermining them.

Still, even though the students mostly avoided the cultural conflicts between their hometown and their developing values, some were able to admit that they understood why those who continued to live in their hometown held the values that they did. For example, Tracie understood how the strong sense of tradition within the community played a role in how values were passed down from generation to generation and Nick understood why people in his hometown felt that they had been forgotten by the government and were isolated from people in power. The students being able to understand why people in their rural community held values that were in conflict with their own, seemed to help calm their frustration with those views.

As previously mentioned, many students still spoke of their hometown with great fondness despite their disagreements with some of the more conservative values. It is in these moments where I believe Anzaldúa's (1987) concept of the tolerance for ambiguity is beginning to grow in the students. This ambivalence comes when students still feel connected to the place that played a significant role in how they grew up but also feel connected to their new campus. While the initial premise of the conceptual framework was that this tolerance for ambiguity would lead to students feeling that they were not at home in either place, ultimately it seems that those students who are gaining this tolerance for ambiguity are doing so because they feel at home in both places. If students truly did not care, or no longer felt at home, in their rural communities then it would not matter that the new values they were embracing were in conflict with their hometown. Therefore, for those students who do seem to be experiencing some internal conflict, the source is not because the new values they are encountering on campus are in conflict with the values they previously held, but because the values that they are developing are in conflict with a place they still care about. I believe that if students are willing to more fully engage with this ambivalence, and continue their relationships with those in their community as their full selves, the students could not only be a more fully present both on campus and in their community, but also be a more effective liaisons between the two spaces helping to facilitate relationships that could be mutually beneficial for the university, the communities, and ultimately the students.

Furthermore, if students are willing to engage with their rural community without employing a façade, their new views can be introduced back into the community

potentially adding some of the diversity of thought that the students desired growing up. If students care about their communities, but would like to see shifts in the culture and a broader range of ideas and values made available to those in the community, the students must be willing to do the hard work of being fully present within their hometown and risk the potential conflict in order to engage the community with these new ideas. While students may fear that this type of conflict will create greater social distance between themselves and community members, working through such conflict could ultimately strengthen the bonds between the students and the people they continue to care about in their hometowns.

THEORETICAL PROPOSAL

The findings that emerged from the analysis of this data supported many of the assumptions made by the conceptual framework laid out in chapter two. Students drew upon three of the six forms of cultural capital outlined by Yosso (2005) at various points in their transition into higher education. Aspirational capital was the starting point for most of the students' journey into higher education. Whether it was discovering career pathways they were passionate about that would require them to pursue a degree or just wanting to explore something beyond the boundaries of their hometown, aspirational capital played an important role in moving them toward higher education and sustaining them as they pursued their degree.

The second form of capital that students called on in their transition into higher education was familial capital. Just as familial capital within Yosso's (2005) model includes bonds beyond the biological relatives, I include skills and knowledge that

students gained from the culture of the community as a whole because of the close bonds the students typically felt with their hometown, even when they were frustrated by it. These bonds kept the students connected to the community even after leaving it and helped students understand the value of having a close-knit community, which they sought to recreate once on campus. At the same time, the support of the family and their home community also played an important role in encouraging the students as they made choices about higher education and finally matriculated.

Finally, students leveraged the knowledge and skills they gained as a result of growing up in their community translating them into navigational capital once they matriculated onto campus. Students were able to call upon their work ethic and problem solving skills to learn to navigate the institutional structures at the university. While Yosso's (2005) conception of navigational capital is focused on institutional structures, students also had to learn to navigate their new physical spaces, which was an important part of them feeling more comfortable on campus. Another important component to this process was for students to begin to generate communities, and hopefully social capital, on the campus. While students had experienced the value of social capital in their hometowns, this capital did not translate to campus as other forms of capital had and needed to be recreated as navigated their new space. Figure 6.1 demonstrates how these various forms of capital change in salience as students move through the transition into higher education. The figure begins in the top left hand corner as the students first make their decision to enter higher education and then use different forms of capital as they progress toward their degree.

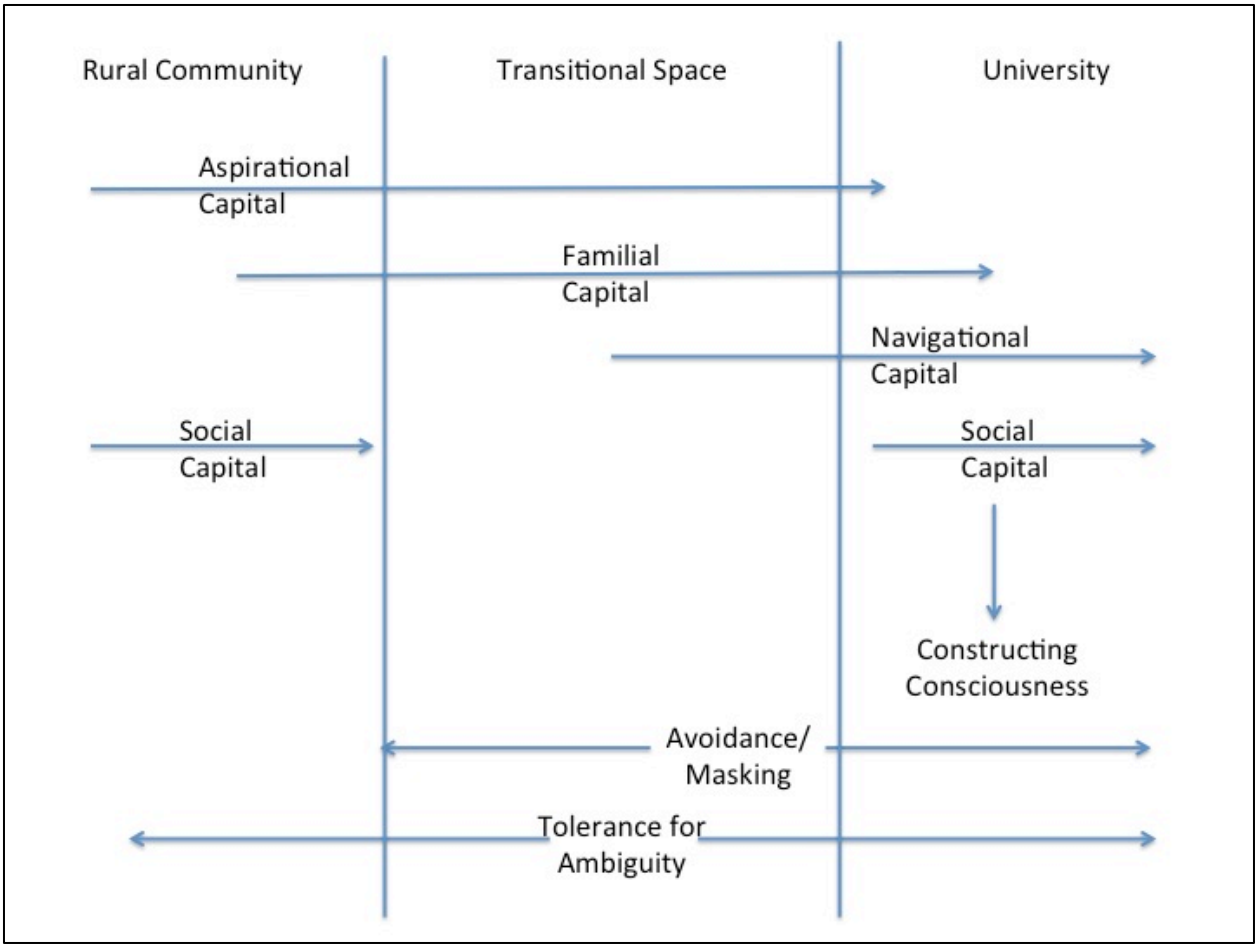

Figure 6.1 : Diagram of proposed theoretical framework

Once students had matriculated onto campus and begun to navigate the institutional structures of the university, they were able to explore the new ideas and values that many had specifically chosen UT for the opportunity to explore. While concepts from this phase still connect to Anzaldúa's (1987) work, they did not manifest in the ways anticipated by the conceptual framework. Rather than students needing to deconstruct a consciousness built within their rural community, they were constructing their consciousness for the first time and doing so in a deliberate and intentional way. As

a result of this newly forming consciousness, students began to feel, or at least anticipate, a tension in their relationships at home.

As students realized a growing disconnect between their own worldview and the culture of their hometown, their primary strategy to manage the real or anticipated conflict was avoidance, whether this meant avoiding specific topics while at home or masking their changing values. While these strategies kept students from having to confront potential relational conflicts, I argue that they also kept students from remaining fully connected to their hometown. Still, some students did remain thoroughly engaged with both their hometown and the UT campus and experienced something more like Anzaldúa's (1987) explanation of tolerance for ambiguity. Even if they disagreed with some of the strongly held beliefs or values of their hometown they understood them and were able to consider that even as they continued to develop their own values and create new communities on campus.

I believe that students who enter this stage of ambivalence are able to more fully engage in both their rural community and the campus, interacting with people in both spaces without masking who they truly are, or who they are becoming. This can be seen in the bottom half of Figure 6.1 starting on the right hand side as students begin constructing their consciousness and moving back toward the left as they reengage with their community while developing their new views. The figure also highlights the proposition that students who willing to embrace the tolerance for ambiguity are able to more fully reenter the community than those who utilize avoidance or masking strategies.

IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH, PRACTICE, AND POLICY

Each of the themes that emerged from this study has implications for stakeholders in higher education as well as for rural communities themselves. These findings can begin by helping to reframe the characteristics of rural communities that are often presented from a deficit perspective. In addition, the findings generated through this study can have implications for creating mutually beneficial relationships between rural communities and institutions of higher education. Higher education has the opportunity to increase enrollment and enhance the diversity of their student bodies while rural communities have the potential to create more nimble and sustainable economies. Finally, creating strong and supportive connections between rural communities and higher education could also allow students to see value in the ambivalence that can come with feeling connected to both their rural community and their university and feel truly at home in both places.

Implications for Research

Findings that emerged from this study have implications for research both in considerations for how rural is defined within research and by proposing a theoretical framework to be tested. Given the agency to self-identify as rural and provide their own definition of what that means added a contextual depth to the study that would have been missed by having a more restrictive set of criteria for students to meet. As a result, I was able to uncover stronger connections between the students' definitions of being rural, their experiences transitioning into higher education, and their strategies for managing the conflicts that arose. This in turn strengthened the new theoretical proposal. Below are

two implications for researchers seeking to better understand rural students in higher education.

Reframing rural

The urban-centric nature of our society means that not only are rural spaces often defined as that which is not urban but also that by not being urban the space is inferior. Once again, Theobald and Wood (2010) explain that these messages are imbedded in our media from magazines to television and can become engrained in rural students' understanding of their community at an early age. Therefore, the small size of these communities and their isolation from rural spaces are often cast as negative traits. The students within this study acknowledged the limited resources that came with the size of their community and their enjoyment of the conveniences found within the city; however, they also discussed the positive aspects of these characteristics.

Though the communities were small in physical size, they were also small in population. This meant that students felt they had more physical space to themselves in their hometowns. At the same time that there was more physical space there was less social space. At times the students expressed frustration with everyone in the community knowing everything about them but they also appreciated how tight-knit and supportive their communities could be. The small population size and everyone in the community sharing the same resources were a part of creating the strong bonds within the community.

The physical isolation of rural communities can also be seen as a negative and, once again, students acknowledge the challenges of this separation when they needed to

travel to shop for certain things or, for some of the students, when the nearest community college was more than 45 minutes away. Yet, the students also highlight the positive attributes of their community that are a result of this separation. They appreciated how quiet their small town could be and the lack of traffic to fight through. Students also appreciated things like the ability to see stars, which are hidden by the light pollution of the city. In addition to this appreciation acknowledged by the students, it seems that these limited resources may have also helped students develop problem-solving skills that were useful as they learned to navigate higher education.

Therefore, one of the first implications of these findings is the reframing of rurality. This study reveals that when rural people are given the agency to define rurality for themselves, rural spaces can be defined not only on their own terms but also from an asset-based perspective. This process allows rural citizens to promote the value within their communities that is often overlooked in urban-centric narratives. As these findings suggest, the characteristics of size and space, which are typically used to identify what is rural, do not have to be abandoned, but they can be reclaimed in a way that acknowledges the value found in them.

Reframing rurality is one way to combat the deficit mindset highlighted Theobald and Wood's (2010) work. One practical way to encourage this process is for researchers to continue to allow rural people the agency to self-identify and define what it means to be rural. This process can make scholars work more powerful as they pursue research that centers rural students and amplifies their voices within spaces of higher education and hopefully other aspects of society. Rural scholars should use critical perspectives

that counteract urban normative narratives and pursue the research of rural communities from an asset-based perspective.

Furthermore, in addition to reframing rural from an asset-based perspective, scholars must also continue to combat perpetual myths of rural students as a monolith and narratives center White working-class rural communities as representative of all rural spaces. The sample of students in this study exhibits the diversity that exists across rural communities as well as the students who come from them. The race, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation of each student made him or her no more or less rural than the next. Each students story offered important insight into the overall experiences of rural students and scholars must be intentional about acknowledging this diversity if they are to offer a true representation of rurality to the field. As stated in chapter one, without scholars being intentional, people of color can end up erased from the narratives of rural communities when rural scholars focus only on White people within their work and erased from research on people of color when it is primarily focused on urban spaces (hooks, 2012). Rural scholars must work diligently to fight this erasure and reframe narratives of rural spaces in ways that are not only more inclusive but also more complex.

Testing the proposed theoretical framework

Many of the assumptions from the original conceptual framework created based on extant literature held true for the participants in this study. The resulting slightly altered theoretical framework offered in this chapter provides a new framework for researcher to use as they consider the experiences of rural students transitioning into higher education and then between their hometown and college or university. Still, for the

students in this study making the choice to attend The University of Texas at Austin meant making a choice to pursue their degree in a place that is as different from their hometown as possible, short of leaving the state. It was a deliberate choice to go to one of the largest schools in the state, in an urban area, and, at least perceived to be, more liberal and more diverse than their hometowns. Based on this contrast between the hometowns and the site of the study, this could be seen as an extreme case. Researchers should test the proposed framework across additional institutional types and geographic regions to better understand its utility in explaining the experiences or rural students in higher education and hopefully in turn, its utility in creating new ways to serve these students.

Implications for Practice

In addition to implications for research there are also many implications for practice in higher education including opportunities to create mutually beneficial relationships between rural communities and institutions of higher education as well as stronger support systems for rural students in each space. As the 2014 report from The Bush School of Government Policy and Public Service at Texas A&M University explained rural students could play an important role in helping Texas public colleges and universities meet enrollment goals. As already stated, in addition to boosting enrollment numbers for institutions of higher education recruitment in rural communities can also help increase the diversity of these institutions. Furthermore, these students can also bring new perspectives to university campuses and then bring the perspectives they gain on campus back to their rural communities enriching both spaces. However, for this

process to work institutions must be committed to not only recruiting these students but also supporting them throughout their time on campus.

Implications for recruitment

If institutions of higher education want to effectively recruit within rural communities, findings from this study could inform their strategies. Analysis of the data revealed that for the students who participated in this study aspirational capital was an impetus for pursuing higher education. Therefore, one of the first ways that institutions of higher education could increase participation from rural students is to help increase aspirational capital within their communities. Because these students often have limited examples of those who pursued higher education in the community, colleges and universities can help rural students by sharing with them the exciting possibilities that exist on university campuses and the careers that a college degree could help them obtain. Colleges should also highlight the resources available to rural students that can help them overcome both real and perceived barriers that they might encounter as they pursue their degree.

An additional step that can be taken to help with the recruitment of students from rural communities is the shaping of community support. The students from this study seemed to feel supported by their communities for the most part and they appreciated this support. However, it is still important to understand that these students represented a small minority from their hometowns. As previously discussed, extant literature reveals that communities can become concerned about issues of outmigration often caused by higher education (Petrin et al., 2014). Increased recruitment efforts from colleges and

universities could heighten these concerns and institutions should be prepared to address them.

One strategy that institutions could implement is to work with communities to identify career opportunities for students that could not only be supported by the community but also help strengthen its economy in the face of corporations seeking to exploit the natural resources of rural spaces and forces from corporate agribusiness challenging small family farms (Donehower et al., 2011a). If higher education could work with rural communities to identify such economic opportunities and create strategies for meeting those needs, it could be possible to encourage community support for higher education without increasing fears about outmigration. Such opportunities could also increase the number of people who return to the community after earning a degree and breakdown some of the perceived barriers students believe stand between them and an undergraduate education.

Another strategy for building support within rural communities could be to find appropriate ways to work with churches in the community. As mentioned earlier, churches within rural communities are often not simply the site of religious practice in the community, but also provide social events for the town. The participants in this study noted that the churches in their communities were the primary influence for setting social norms within the town. If colleges and universities can find appropriate ways to engage with the religious institutions of rural communities this could be one of the most effective ways for shifting the social norms of the community and possibly help create a college-going culture.

Implications for on campus support

Another opportunity for colleges and universities to increase opportunities for rural students is to honor the skills they gain from their hometown within the institution and help them translate their practical knowledge into the college or university setting. Students in this study came with a wide variety of skills that were not necessarily deemed valuable within institutions of higher education. While the these practical skills may not directly translate into institutions of higher education, administrators can consider how to help students convert the lessons of perseverance, problem solving, and critical thinking, into the context of a college classroom or navigating a new campus and city. In addition to helping students navigate challenges they face once they arrive on campus, considering how these skills can be transferable and presenting these concepts to students even as they make choices about higher education could help alleviate fears about pursuing a degree and the perceived barriers that could stand in the way.

In addition to helping students understand how the work ethic and problem solving skills they gained growing up in a rural space can translate into success on the college campus, administrators can also help rural students connect to one another once they arrive on campus. Yet again, this is not a new or novel concept. Helping students create smaller communities to feel connected to the larger university is a common practice and one of the most prominent themes for students was that their involvement in student organizations and on-campus jobs helped create this community.

For many of the students, these smaller communities were also an opportunity for them to further explore aspects of their identity in new ways. While the students had

opportunities to further consider their race, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation on campus, they did not have a community that encouraged them to explore their rurality in this new social context. Providing rural students with opportunities to connect to one another could help them better understand how their background informs who they are and that there are other students negotiating similar challenges. This could also provide a space for students to devise new strategies to manage their changing relationships back home. With half of the participants in this study explicitly discussing the helpfulness of the Center for Mental Health and Counseling, a group through the campus counseling and mental health services might be an additional consideration for how to help support these students.

Acknowledging challenges

Though the creation of mutually beneficial relationships with rural communities is an exciting prospect, it is important to acknowledge the challenges that are inherent to such an endeavor. Some of the same characteristics that can be reframed as positive for rural communities, such as their small population and separation from other communities, can also present real challenges for institutions of higher education. In order to create relationships with rural communities, colleges and universities in many cases will have to travel farther to reach fewer students.

To make these efforts worthwhile institutions will have to view this as a comprehensive and long-term strategy to recruit whole new populations of students, rather than simply reaching out to a single new community or school. As a result, colleges and universities will also need to create new strategies for recruitment in these

spaces. First steps for these new strategies can be found in the previous suggestions for increasing aspirational capital, shaping community support, and helping students translate skills and knowledge gained within their communities into their university setting. However, due to limited resources at the disposal of postsecondary institutions, initiating these relationships could still be difficult.

One way to help build relationships within these communities is to make sure that alumni who come from the communities remain engaged with both their hometown and the university and utilize those alumni as liaisons between the two spaces, whether they return to live in the community or not. The institutions can begin with towns that students have matriculated from in the past and then spread to surrounding areas. As previously mentioned, even though the students were not planning to return to their communities after graduation, they did continue to be connected to their hometowns. Colleges and universities should encourage students to maintain these bonds and use them as a way to encourage younger students still in the community to pursue a degree. This strategy could help create a pipeline into a community, resulting in more extensive alumni networks connected to the town, and a strengthening the relationship with the community while simultaneously alleviating the resources necessary to maintain those relationships.

Remaining rural

As the previous implication from this research suggested there is value in encouraging rural students to remain connected to their hometowns. While analysis of the data from this study revealed that the students from rural communities who

matriculated to UT had values that aligned more closely with the university than their hometown, and none of the students intended to move back to their rural community, many still felt a fondness for their hometown. This could mean helping students move past avoidance techniques and masking their changing values to a place of tolerance for ambiguity that allows students to be more fully engaged in both their rural community and college campus. Helping students to maintain a relationship with their hometown while still developing their worldview in a way that feels genuine to them, could be beneficial to the student, university, and the rural community. This is not to say that the values of rural communities and institutions of higher education are always, or will always be, in conflict with one another; however, allowing students to develop their values within the university setting, while also helping them negotiate potential tensions with their hometown, could allow students continue to draw upon the support of their community as they pursue their degree, continue to develop their own personal world view, and ultimately help build a relationship between the institution and the community.

Reframing rurality can be one way to help students feel comfortable maintaining their relationships with their hometowns. Allowing students agency to define where they came from and emphasize its value, as well as framing any recruitment or support initiatives around asset-based understandings of rural communities, could help students feel proud of where they have come from rather than feeling it is inferior or a hindrance to their success. Taking this a step further, helping rural students remain connected to their communities can help strengthen relationships with those communities and increase

the capacity to work with them. These alumni offer examples of members of the community who have been successful in higher education.

Furthermore, helping rural students who matriculate into higher education remain connected to their hometowns and creating these pipelines into rural communities could serve the additional purpose of helping K-12 students generate social capital within their hometown that translates more effectively into higher education. While current evidence shows that students are able to generate social capital within their hometown, the isolated social networks prevent much of that capital from being leveraged on the campus. Helping alumni and current undergraduate students sustain the relationships within the community can open those social networks and add another form of capital available to the students throughout their transition to higher education.

Implications for Policy

In addition to expanding recruitment opportunities within rural communities, helping rural students remain connected to their hometowns can also help institutions understand, and in turn meet the needs of, those communities. As previously mentioned, in Texas, nonprofit organizations are already examining the potential for rural to play a key role in meeting the enrollment and persistence goals set by the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (Texas A&M, 2014). This highlights an opportunity for policy makers outside of specific institutions to incentivize and facilitate the creation of relationships between institutions of higher education and rural communities. However, these relationships need to be mutually beneficial, particularly in light of concerns about outmigration.

One way that institutions of higher education might initiate and grow relationships with rural communities is by working with them to identify needs within the communities and developing strategies for how they could be met through higher education. Still, just as it is vital for researchers to acknowledge the diversity across rural communities it is also important of policy actors to consider this diversity. As previous data has revealed, and the sample for this study reinforces, there is a great deal of racial and ethnic diversity across the rural communities of Texas. These communities are culturally and geographically different from one another and as a result will have different needs. Therefore, policy makers seeking to support relationships between higher education and rural communities must resist the urge to create blanket policies for all rural spaces and instead take the time to consider how policies may need to vary across different regions in order to create similar outcomes in each area. Yet again, stakeholders in this process will need to understand this as a comprehensive and long-term project; however, with the potential to revitalize rural communities and enrich college and university campuses it should be seen as a worthwhile investment.

FUTURE RESEARCH

While this study initiates an important line of inquiry into understanding the experiences of students who enter higher education from rural communities, there is still a great deal more to learn. Future research should examine the transitions of rural students into different institutional types within higher education and students who are from rural communities in different regions across the country. Scholars should also continue to explore how students understand growing up in a rural community as a part

of their identity and how that rurality intersects with and impacts other aspects of their identity.

Next steps for this research could include exploring the experiences of rural students who attend different types of institutions within the same urban context or who are attending a similar institution but in a more rural setting. For example, the experience of students from rural communities who attend Texas A&M University, which is also a large and prestigious research university, but is set in a more rural space, has an emphasis on agriculture, and is seen as more conservative, could be very different from the students within this study. Similarly, rural students who attend different institutions within the same urban context such as Huston-Tillotson University, a private HBCU, or St. Edwards University, a private Jesuit university, could also have a very different experience from the students at UT even though all three universities are located in Austin.

Furthermore, researchers should also investigate the experiences of rural students who attend a variety of minority serving institutions, which were specifically designed to serve, or have taken on a mission to serve, typically marginalized student populations. Rural students may also have very different experiences at regional universities and community college that allow them to remain in their community, or stay closer to home, while pursuing a degree. Smaller liberal arts universities may offer an easier adjustment based on their size and the likelihood that students' lives within the university may overlap in similar ways to what the students experienced in their hometowns. Scholars should take the time to compare and contrast how students navigate their transitions into

these various institutional types and how the institutions respond differently to the needs of rural students.

Also, this study was completed at a Texas university and all of the students who participated were from rural communities in Texas. It is important to consider how this regional context influences the students' experiences. For example, even within this study differences can be seen between different regions of the state, such as which communities were predominantly Catholic and which are Protestant and which leaned Democratic and which leaned Republican. These differences were also related to shifts in the ethnic and racial make-up the various regions of the state. While these regional differences existed across the state there were still common themes that emerged for the students. Continued research on rural students should also compare and contrast the experiences of students entering higher education from rural regions beyond Texas to see which of the emerging themes may be applicable beyond the state borders and which are specific to Texas. This work is important for the continued dismantling of the myth that rural students are a monolith and highlighting the complexity and diversity of rural populations.

Finally, because it is important to acknowledge this diversity and the complexity of rural students it is also important for scholars interested in understanding rural students to explore how their rural upbringing impacts who they are as a person and how this aspect of their identity intersects with their race, sexual orientation, gender, and religion. Findings from this study raise questions in each of these areas, including students' understanding of racial diversity, the strong influence of the Christian faith within their

communities, and cultural norms around gender and sexuality that were enforced by local churches. Each of these findings should be examined more in depth and in different ways.

CLOSING PERSONAL REFLECTION

Thinking back on the first weeks of my time as an undergraduate, I remember the feelings of excitement and anxiety that, after years of working as a director for orientation, I now know are common emotions that most students experience as they transition to not just a new community, but a new phase in life. However, I also remember the feelings of inadequacy that I often attributed to coming from such as small town and that while other people around me were facing challenges, it felt that mine were different from those of my urban and suburban peers. As I talked to the friends I had grown up with who also moved away to go to college, I heard similar stories about the challenges they were facing. As I returned to pursue my Ph.D. and decided I wanted to center rural students in my research, I realized how little work had been done in this area. There were no theories that spoke to the experiences of this population of students. Their stories were not being told. This only affirmed to me that this was the direction my research should take.

As I began to discuss my desire to study the experiences of rural students I also realized how many misconceptions there were about who rural students are. Therefore, when constructing this study I knew that seeking a diverse sample was critical to the work that I wanted to do. Still, I was anxious that pulling from such a diverse set of students, coming from so many different types of rural communities, no common themes

would emerge. Though I was an insider to the population, having grown up in a rural community myself, I was not convinced that I would relate to the experiences of my participants coming from communities that demographically, politically, and regionally seemed very different from my own. Despite the expectation that I would struggle to find similarities across the participants' stories, or even connections to my own experience, I found myself nodding in agreement and understanding as students shared about their lives. In the end, each student was unique and had a distinctive story, yet common themes still emerged from their narratives.

The literature that I reviewed in preparation for this study clearly informed the conceptual framework for the research as well as the title for this work; however, I still saw my own experiences in both. I remembered struggling to feel like fit in when I first arrived at my alma mater, but then as I grew and developed on the campus, I felt less and less comfortable when I returned to the town that I have always called home. For years I interpreted this tension as struggling to feel at home either place. However, as I spent time working through the data of this study, I finally realized that while students experienced frustrations and tensions within each space, they also found community and support in each space as well. Had the students no longer felt connected to their hometowns, it would not matter if their developing values were in conflict with the culture they grew up in and if they never found a community on their new campus they would likely not be developing their new worldviews in the same way.

So, maybe in the end it is not that students from rural communities, and if I am honest, myself, feel a tension because they are unable to find a place that is home, but

because multiple places have become home. They continue to feel connected to their rural community while creating new communities on campus and in the end are able to find support and create a feeling of home, maybe something that could be understood as love, in more than one place. And so, as I opened with words from the beginning of *The Wizard of Oz* (LeRoy, 1939) about Dorothy seeking to leave her life in rural Kansas behind, and after I have wrestled with these findings and come to new realizations for the participants in my study and for myself, it only seems fitting to end with these final words from Dorothy in *The Wiz* (Cohen, 1978):

> Living here in this brand new world might be a fantasy
> But it taught me to love
> And so it's real to me
> And I learned that we must look inside our hearts to find
> A world full of love like yours like mine
> Like home!

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: UNDERSTANDING THE NCES TOWN CATEGORY

Within the category of "town" the population of the largest communities in the category are 20 times the size of the smallest communities. This holds true across any subcategory for "town," because the subcategories are broken down by distance from an urbanized area rather than further narrowing by size as they are for the categories of city and suburb. To add further context to this variation, the range for the entire category of suburb is 50,000 to 250,000 meaning that the largest community in the category is only 5 times as large as the smallest community in the category (U.S. NCES, n.d.). The subcategories "city small" and "city midsize" are fairly narrowly defined; however the "city large" subcategory has no upper limit. If you look at the population of the largest city in the country, New York City, with a population of 8,354,889 at, is just over 32 times the size of the smallest communities in this subcategory (Social Explorer, 2014). However, the next largest city in the country Los Angeles is less than half that size at 3,862,210, which is just over 11 times the size of the smallest communities in this subcategory. Houston, the largest city in Texas, and fourth largest in the country, is only 8 times the difference.

APPENDIX B: SURVEY

Name:

Age:

Gender:

Race/Ethnicity:

1. Do you identify in any other ways that are important to you? If so, please share.

2. What pronouns do you prefer?

3. What is your current classification?

- ❍ First-year
- ❍ Sophomore
- ❍ Junior
- ❍ Senior

4. What is your major?

5. What is the name of your hometown?

6. Do you consider your hometown to be rural?

7. What is the approximate population of your hometown?

8. Approximately how far away is your hometown from the nearest town with a population greater than 50,000?

9. How many years did you live in the town?

10. When did you move away from your hometown?

APPENDIX C: FIRST INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

1. How would you describe your hometown?
2. What does rural mean to you?
3. What was it like to grow up there?
4. How do you think that it has impacted who you are, if at all?
5. Can you describe how you made the choice to go to college?
    a. …where to go to college?
    b. …what your major would be?
6. What were the easiest parts about leaving your hometown?
7. What were the most challenging parts?
8. How would you describe your college campus?
9. In what ways is it similar to your hometown?
10. In what ways is it different?

APPENDIX D: SECOND INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

1. In our last interview you talked about **size** being difference between your college and hometown, what challenges did you experience managing that difference? You also talked about
2. What skills or resources made that process easier?
3. What ideas have you been exposed to on campus that you had not been exposed to prior to college?
4. How have evaluated those ideas?
5. Have you experienced any ideas, concepts, or values on campus that were in conflict with beliefs and values you held prior to arriving on campus?
6. How did you manage that conflict?
7. In what ways have you changed as a result of your time in college?
8. How have those changes impacted your relationships with those at home?
    a. With those on campus?
9. Considering the tensions that you mentioned, what role do you think your rural background plays in your current experiences on campus?
10. What role do you think your time on campus plays in your experiences back home?
11. How do you see these experiences informing your future plans?
12. In what ways might your rural background continue to inform your experiences?
13. In what other ways do you see your experience and transition here to college as different from other who didn't come from rural communities?

14. When people find out you are from a rural community do you think that impacts the way people view you?
15. What things do you think you gained from growing up in a rural community that you use here at college that others may not have?

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